THE OUTDOOR CHUMS AT CABIN POINT

By
CAPTAIN QUINCY ALLEN

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THEY HAD FRESH FISH FOR SUPPER THAT EVENING.

The Outdoor Chums at Cabin Point. *Frontispiece (Page 146)*

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS AT CABIN POINT

OR

The Golden Cup Mystery

BY

CAPTAIN QUINCY ALLEN

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR CHUMS," "THE OUTDOOR CHUMS IN THE BIG WOODS," ETC.

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BY CAPTAIN QUINCY ALLEN

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THE OUTDOOR CHUMS
Or The First Tour of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club

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Or Lively Adventures on Wildcat Island

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Or Laying the Ghost of Oak Ridge

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THE OUTDOOR CHUMS IN THE BIG WOODS
Or The Rival Hunters of Lumber Run

THE OUTDOOR CHUMS AT CABIN POINT
Or The Golden Cup Mystery

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The Outdoor Chums at Cabin Point

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THE OUTDOOR CHUMS AT CABIN POINT

CHAPTER I

ON THE WAY TO CAMP

"We're going into the woods light this time, it seems, boys."

"Remember, Bluff, we sent along most of our stuff, such as blankets and grub, as also the cooking outfit, in charge of old Anthony, the stage driver."

"That's a fact, Will, and he was to leave it at the abandoned mine shaft, from which point we expect to make pack horses of ourselves."

"True for you, Jerry! And unless Frank here has made a mistake in his reckoning we're due to reach that hole in the ground before another hour."

"How about that, Frank?"

"We'll fetch up there in less time than that I reckon, fellows. To tell you the truth, it can't be more than a mile away from here."

"Bully for that! And after we get over the peak of this rocky ridge we ought to be on the down-grade most of the way."

When Jerry Wallington gave expression to his gratitude after this fashion, two of his companions waved their hats as though he voiced their sentiments. One of these boys was Will Milton, and while he did not seem to be quite as vigorous as his chums, still his active life during the last two years had done much to build up his strength. As for Bluff Masters, any one could see from his looks that he had a constitution of iron, while his face told of determination bordering on obstinacy. The fourth member of the little party tramping along this road leading over the ridge was Frank Langdon. He was a boy of many parts, able to take the lead in most matters, and looked up to by his comrades.

All of them lived in the town of Centerville, where, on account of their love for the open and for camp life, they had become known as the "Outdoor Chums." Fortune had indeed been kind to these four boys, and allowed them to enjoy opportunities for real sport that come the way of few lads.

They had first called themselves the "Rod, Gun and Camera Club," because their activities

in the woods partook of the nature of these several branches of sport. Will was an ardent photographer, and his work had received high praise. Indeed, it was only recently that he had captured a cash prize offered by a prominent newspaper for the best collection of flashlight pictures of wild animals in their native haunts.

This had been accomplished only after the most persistent and laborious efforts. It was carried out during a delightful trip, taken by the boys to the Maine country, where they met with some exceedingly interesting adventures, all of which were set down in the seventh volume of this series, under the title of "The Outdoor Chums in the Big Woods; Or, The Rival Hunters of Lumber Run."

Those readers who have followed the fortunes of Frank and his three wide-awake comrades in previous stories have of course come to look on them as old friends, and need no further introduction. As there may be some, however, who are now making their acquaintance for the first time it may be well to mention a few things connected with their past, as well as to explain why they were now bound for a new camping ground in a region they had never before visited.

Naturally, they knew every foot of country

for many miles around Centerville. They had roamed over Oak Ridge and the Sunset Mountains, camped on Wildcat Island, situated in Camelot Lake, and scoured the region roundabout.

More than this, wonderful opportunities had come to these boys to visit distant parts of the States. On one occasion they had taken a trip South, going to the Gulf of Mexico. Another time it had been a visit to the Rocky Mountains where they hunted big game. Then, on a houseboat belonging to an eccentric uncle of Will's, they voyaged down the great Mississippi River to New Orleans, meeting with numerous adventures on the way.

When they returned home after their first year at college, of course the regular question came up immediately: "Where shall we go for the next outing? because we must get into the woods somehow, and live close to Nature for a spell, to fish, and take pictures, and just forget all our troubles."

Many ideas were suggested, but it remained for Bluff Masters to bring up the most catching plan. By some means he had heard of a place a good many miles away from their home town where the big lake lay for many miles between the hills.

Here he had been told by one who knew that they would be apt to find the seclusion they sought, since few people lived in that section of country. Small game was plentiful enough to give Will all the fun he wanted in laying his traps, in order that raccoons and opossums and foxes might be coaxed to snap off their own pictures.

Fishing ought to be good in the waters of the inland sea, and all of them professed to be ardent disciples of the hook and line. In fact, Bluff laid out such an alluring programme that he actually carried the others by storm.

Accordingly, preparations were made to go to the distant lake. Frank, as was his habit, did everything in his power to pick up information concerning the lay of the land. He even made up a sort of map, based on what he was able to learn, although frankly admitting that it might prove faulty in many places. It was going to be one of his personal tasks to rectify these mistakes, and bring back an accurate chart of the whole district.

Besides being an ardent photographer, Will had taken up the study of medicine, as he anticipated some day being a physician. The boys were in the habit of calling him "Doctor Will" at times; and whenever there arose an occasion that

called for his aid he was only too willing to apply his knowledge of the healing art.

Bluff Masters had perhaps been well named by his boy friends for he was not only a frank sort of boy, but there were many times when just out of a desire to tease he would try to "bluff" those with whom he chanced to be arguing.

At the same time Bluff was a hearty boy, with plenty of good nature, and was a favorite with his companions. He and Jerry were both apt to be a little boisterous, and to express their dislikes rather forcibly, but the others knew their little failings and paid small attention to them as a rule.

As they mentioned in their chatter while they tramped along the rough up-hill road, they had found a chance to send most of their camp outfit ahead of them by the stage. It was to be left at the shaft of the old abandoned mine, which they had heard so much about, though of course had never seen.

After reaching that point they expected to leave the road and plunge directly into the woods, taking a short-cut for the big lake. Here they had planned to search for an old cabin situated on a point that stretched out into the beautiful bay, and which Frank believed might serve them in lieu of a tent; indeed, trusting to the informa-

tion they had received, they had not bothered to carry any canvas along with them on the trip.

"What if that old cabin proves to be a myth after all, Frank?" Bluff was asking as they toiled along, with a wall of rock on one hand and a dizzy precipice close on the other side.

"Perhaps we'll be sorry about leaving out that fine waterproof tent of ours," suggested Will, who did not like to "rough it" quite so much as did the others.

"Shucks!" ejaculated Jerry, with fine scorn, "what's the matter with our building a shelter of logs, bark and driftwood on the shore of the lake, if the worst strikes us? It wouldn't be the first time we'd done such a thing either, eh, Frank?"

"I reckon we could do it without straining a point," the other observed quietly. "But don't borrow trouble, Bluff. Time enough to cross your bridges when you get to them. That old cabin stood there last summer, I was told, and likely to hold out for a good many more seasons unless some one should deliberately burn it down."

"Who would be apt to do such a silly thing as that, tell me?" demanded Bluff.

"I don't think any one would," Frank hastened to reply; "but I've been told there's a

peculiar old hermit living on an estate not a great way distant from Cabin Point. He is said to be a rich man, but seems to want to keep away from his fellows, and has built a house up here on his property."

"You mean Aaron Dennison, of course, Frank," said Will. "I was interested in what we were told about him. He seems to be a regular bear, and refuses to make friends with anybody drifting up here."

"The loggers over at Edmundson Cove tell queer yarns of the things he has done," Frank continued, with a faint smile; "and to own up to the truth, I'm rather hoping we run across old Aaron. He must be quite a character from all we've heard, and somehow I've grown curious about him."

"And if I get half a chance," observed Will, whose mind usually ran in the one channel, which of course covered his hobby, "I mean to snap off a picture of him. I've got a lot of freaks in my collection, but nary a hermit nor a crank."

"All I hope for," said Jerry, "is that he doesn't try to make it unpleasant for us up here. For one, I expect to give him a wide berth. These hermits are not much to my fancy. You never know what to expect from the lot. But, Frank, after all, we're not the only fellows traveling

along this mountain road. Look up ahead and you'll see a chap hurrying this way."

"He's not much older than any of us, it seems," remarked Bluff, as all of them immediately focussed their gaze on the figure that had turned a bend in the rough road, and was hurriedly advancing in a somewhat careless fashion.

"He's carrying a bag just like my new one," remarked Will, patting the article in question affectionately, as though it contained something which he valued very much.

"I shouldn't be surprised if he were heading for that railroad station we struck a mile back," suggested Frank. "It was only a flag station, but trains stop there on signal most likely."

"But where on earth could that natty young fellow come from, do you think?" Will asked. "I hope there isn't a camp of city boys up here anywhere, because if that turned out to be the case there'd be small chance for me to get the pictures of game I'm hoping to strike."

"He sees us now," remarked Jerry, "but is coming along faster than ever. Perhaps he's running away from something, for he looked back just then over his shoulder."

"Yes, and came near taking a nasty fall in the bargain," commented Will, who had started with sudden fear; "it strikes me he's a pretty careless

sort of fellow. On a dangerous road like this it pays to watch your step, as a fall might mean a broken leg, or even worse. Oh! look there, boys, he's stumbled again, and gone over the edge of the precipice!"

All of them stared in awe, for what Will called out was only too true. The advancing figure was no longer in sight, for upon making that false step he had fallen to his knees, made a violent effort to keep from slipping over the edge, and then disappeared.

CHAPTER II

A COOL CUSTOMER

"COME on everybody!" shouted Jerry, starting to run up the grade in his customary impetuous way.

The other three were close at his heels. All were inspired by an eager desire to find out whether the stranger had actually fallen all the way down the face of that steep declivity, or had managed to catch hold of some friendly projection.

If the chums had felt tired before that thrilling moment they quite forgot the circumstance in their wild anxiety to learn what had happened to the strange boy. Fortunately the spot where they had last seen the other vanish was not far away, and they soon came to the place.

Jerry was already flat on his stomach and peering over the edge when the other boys arrived. Even before they could see for themselves his shout announced that he had made an important discovery.

"He's hanging to a point of rock down there, as sure as anything, Frank! Oh! how are we going to get to him before his arms give way? See how he's throwing his feet up, trying to ease the strain, but there's nothing doing. Shall I go down there after him, Frank?"

"Don't you think of it, Jerry!" cried the alarmed Will; "let Frank make up a plan. You'd only tumble yourself, don't you know?"

Frank Langdon had an exceedingly active mind. He seemed to be able to grasp a situation instantly, and to decide quickly the best thing to do in an emergency.

Even while running to the spot he had used his eyes to advantage.

"Wait for me!" was what he snapped as he flung himself around.

Bluff, twisting his head backwards, saw that Frank was making for a tree that had been blown down at some previous time. It chanced to be close at hand, and in a dozen seconds the running boy had gained the spot.

Then Bluff gave a cry of mingled delight and admiration.

"It certainly takes Frank to hatch up a clever scheme on the spur of the moment! He's dragging that old wild grave-vine out from the wreck of the tree!" was what Bluff exclaimed in an

ecstasy of satisfaction. "Oh! why didn't he tell me to go along with him? What if he can't manage it alone?"

Bluff was in the act of clambering to his feet when Jerry halted him.

"It's all right, Bluff, for he's got it loose now, and is whooping it up this way like everything. If only that fellow can hold on a little longer we'll pull him up O. K. Hey, down there, take a fresh grip and stick fast! We've got a vine rope coming on the jump! Steady now, old chap; we're standing by you!"

"Hurry!" they heard the other gasp. Undoubtedly after all his exertions he must have been short of breath, though the face he turned up toward them did not appear to be stamped with any great degree of fright.

Just then Frank arrived on the spot, and instantly started to lower the section of wild grapevine he had secured from the fallen tree. It was at least a dozen or fifteen feet in length, and any one acquainted with the amazing strength of such a parasite did not need to be assured that it would easily bear the weight of several persons the weight of one who was in such peril on the rock below.

"Can you change your hold to the vine?" called Frank, when presently he could see that

the lower end of his substitute rope dangled close alongside the other.

It required more or less agility and reserve strength to carry such a proceeding through successfully. The stranger, however, appeared to possess these necessary qualifications, Frank was pleased to see.

Will felt as though his heart was up in his throat as he watched the other hang on to the spur of rock with one hand, and seize the dangling object with the other. Frank had lowered the larger end of the vine. He had also sent it below the jutting rock, so that the one they meant to rescue could clasp his legs about it, and thus secure a much better grip.

When they saw he had really accomplished the difficult feat of transferring his weight to the vine the boys, whose heads projected beyond the ledge above, uttered encouraging shouts.

"Well done, old top!" called out Bluff, carried away by his enthusiasm, and acting as though he had known the other a long time. "Now just give us a little time and we'll run you up here in great shape. Here you come, then! Heave-oh, boys!"

It required their united strength to raise the boy who dangled at the end of the grape-vine. This was on account of the fact that their make-

believe rope refused to bend very well, thus making its hauling up a clumsy business.

Still every foot helped, and all the while some of them kept calling out encouragingly to the boy below. In the end his head appeared in view, upon which he was seized by the arms by Frank and Bluff, and dragged over the edge.

Somewhat to the surprise of the boys, he immediately started to brushing himself off, as though the dust on his clothes bothered him more than any slight bruises he may have received in his ugly fall. Frank made up his mind when he saw this that the other was certainly nonchalant, or, as Frank himself expressed it, "a cool customer."

"I hope you're not hurt by your tumble?" Frank asked, at which the other shook his head, and continued dusting his coat as he replied:

"Don't think I got even a scratch, which is about my ordinary luck. But only for your coming I'd have dropped the rest of the way down to the bottom of the hole, and that might have changed things some. Thank you very much for helping. And that scheme of the wild grave-vine was a corker, too. I'd never have thought of such a thing, I'm positive."

"Oh! trust Frank for hitting the right nail on the head every time," boasted Will, who never

lost a chance to magnify the deeds of the one he admired above any among all his friends.

The other now took occasion to look them over curiously, as though he had begun to wonder who they were, and what brought four boys up into this region. Frank guessed this much, for he immediately introduced himself and his chums.

"We're from Centerville, a town that's a good way off from here. My name's Frank Langdon, this is Will Milton, the one next to him is Bluff Masters, and the other fellow, Jerry Wallington. We have always been mighty fond of camping, and just now mean to put in a few weeks on the shore of the big lake at a place called Cabin Point. Our stuff has gone ahead of us on the stage that came along here yesterday."

Somehow Frank thought the other started a little and looked keenly at him when this announcement was made. He could not understand, though, why it should interest any one to know that they intended to camp at any particular spot on the lake shore, since there were many miles to choose from.

"Oh! my name is Gilbert Dennison. I've been at college, and mean to spend my vacation playing golf. You see they do say I'm runner-up among the amateurs on the green links. Sent my clubs and luggage off yesterday, and was on the way

to the train to-day when the horse smashed a wheel of the rig. I had to put out afoot, for, you see, I wouldn't miss making that train for a good deal, because of the match."

He took out his watch and held it in a hand that hardly trembled in the least, which Frank thought rather remarkable, seeing what a strain had been upon him lately. Altogether, Frank considered him the coolest person he had ever met. If he could control his nerves in this fashion when playing in a match it was no wonder he was looked upon as a coming wonder on the golf links, where such a gift counts heavily.

"You must excuse me for rushing off in such a beastly hurry, fellows!" Gilbert exclaimed, as he looked around for his bag, which, fortunately, had not fallen over the precipice at the time he stumbled; "some other time perhaps I'll run in on you at your camp, and be able to thank you in a more decent way for giving me a lift. I think I can make that train in half an hour."

Bluff and Jerry had not a word to say. They stood and stared at the other, astonished beyond measure. Really in all their experiences far and wide they had never met with such a self-possessed young person as this.

He picked up his bag, waved them a flippant good-bye, and then actually started to run down

the slope. Bluff scratched his head and grinned, while Jerry exclaimed in disgust.

"Gee whiz! if that wasn't the queerest thing ever! You'd think he'd just stubbed his toe, and we happened along in time to help him rub the same. He sure is a cool customer, believe me, fellows!"

"Such base ingratitude I never ran across," ventured Will, indignantly. "Why, only for Frank's fetching that grape-vine along, and our pulling him up so neatly, he'd have had to let go his hold before now. And say, it was all of thirty feet down to the bottom of the hole from the rock he held on to; an ugly fall, I'd call it."

"Oh! well," observed Frank, more amused than otherwise by the singular circumstance, "when a fellow pursues any fad as he does golf he seems to chase it just as we've all done one of those jack-o'-lanterns in the marsh. When the fever is on him he can't think of anything else. That match on the links is, in his mind, the greatest event under the sun. We've all been there, boys, remember."

"But where did he come from, do you think?" asked Will.

"There's a village, I recollect, over the hills that way," Frank explained; "and it's just barely possible his folks live there. Being off the rail-

road, you see they have to make a little journey of some miles every time they want to go to the city. We may run on to the broken-down buggy further on."

"He's still running right along," remarked Jerry.

"And hasn't bothered to look back once," added Will, as though he could not understand why the other should so easily forget about the service they had done him.

"Well, looking back caused him his other stumble, and it's taught him a lesson, I reckon," laughed Frank, always ready to offer excuses for others' failings, but never for his own.

"We might as well be going on our way then, boys," suggested Bluff, as he gave his knapsack a fling that caused it to land squarely on his back.

The others picked up their scanty possessions for, as has been said before, the main part of their belongings had been sent on in advance by the stage.

"For one," observed Will with a little sigh, "I own up I'll be glad when we get to the lake. Seems to me this bag keeps on growing heavier all the time; and yet when I started out this morning I thought it as light as a feather."

"It's always that way," he was told by Frank, consolingly; "even your feet often begin to drag

as though weighted down with lead, when once you find yourself growing tired. But, Will, say the word and I'll tote your bag for you."

"Not much you will, Frank! though it's certainly kind of you to offer to do it. I'd be a nice Outdoor Chum, wouldn't I now, if I let some other fellow shoulder my burdens? If I were sick or lame it might be a different thing; but that doesn't happen to fit the case now. I'll get along all right, so don't worry."

Accordingly they pushed on up the road, and presently arrived at the crest of the ridge. The trees prevented an extended view, however, much to the disappointment of Will, who wanted to make use of his camera.

They saw no signs of the wrecked vehicle mentioned by the young college chap who had given them his name as Gilbert Dennison, and hence concluded it must be further along the road.

A short time afterwards Frank announced that they were near the abandoned mine, which his informants had told him lay close to the border of the road they had followed over the rocky ridge.

CHAPTER III

TAKING POSSESSION

FRANK had learned that many years back there had been a company organized to mine the iron that was known to exist in certain sections of the hills in that region.

Considerable work had been done, and some ore even shipped away, when, for some reason or other, the scheme had been given up after a shaft had been sunk for fifty feet or more, and workings started.

The entrance to the abandoned mine had been visited by curious people coming to that locality. It was even marked on the old map which Frank had used in making the outlines of his own little chart.

"Here it is, boys!" cried Jerry, who had pushed to the front; "Frank was correct when he said he could see where the wheels of the stage had run in off the road just back there. I hope our stuff is all right."

"So do I!" echoed Will, anxiously, "because

I've got most of my new rolls of films, as well as my flashlight apparatus, in my big pack. I'm only carrying a lot of precious developed films in this bag, with other things I need. You see I'm meaning to put in quite a bunch of time while up here experimenting and that's why I carried them along."

They had their fears quickly relieved, for their property lay just inside the old shaft leading into the abandoned iron mine.

"It all seems to be here, and in decent shape," remarked Frank. "That stage driver kept his word when he said he'd take good care of our stuff. And now to divide it up so every one has a share."

"No funny business, Frank," Bluff reminded him; "every one of us expects to get an equal tote load."

"That's what I say, too," echoed Will, who suspected he might be treated too generously by his chums, and given less than his proper proportion to carry, for Will was over-sensitive concerning his lack of physical strength.

In the end they managed to distribute the blankets, food, and other things in a fashion that was fairly equitable, and then resumed their journey. At this point they expected to leave the road, and follow a trail that if stuck to would take them

to the shore of the big lake around Cabin Point, their intended destination.

"Our course should be almost due northwest from here on," the guide informed his three companions as they set forth. "I'm telling you that for a purpose, you understand."

"You mean in case we lose the pesky trail that seems so faint, we can keep going in the right direction all the same; is that it, Frank?" asked Jerry.

"You've struck the right nail on the head, Jerry, for that was what I meant. But by keeping our eyes on the trail we ought to have little trouble following this old path."

"It strikes me the trail hasn't been worked much for some time," Bluff observed.

"That's true enough," said the pilot of the expedition, "but once a trail has been well worn you can find it years and years afterward if you look the right way. It's easy to notice heaps of signs that tell the story, where the earth was worn away by passing feet. When you're in doubt just push back the grass and there it lies as plain as day."

Frank always prided himself more or less on his ability to follow tracks where others might give up the task in despair. Nothing pleased him half so much as to run across a puzzle along these

lines that required his best work in order to find the answer.

After they had gone on for some time a rest was called.

"That's a good idea, Frank," Jerry declared when he heard the order given to drop their burdens and lie around for ten minutes or so. "Not that I'm feeling played out you understand; but I've always been told it was poor policy to whip a willing nag."

"It's certainly a pretty rough path, all right!" Will admitted.

"But we must be about half-way across by now," added Bluff.

"How about that, Frank? Let's take a look at your map again," said Jerry.

Upon examination it was found to be about as Bluff had thought; the shore of the big water could not be more than half a mile further on. Cheered by this information, even Will expressed himself as willing to start again.

"When you've got anything unpleasant to do," he told them, "I believe in getting it over with as soon as you can, and off your mind."

"Huh! that pleases me a heap to hear you say so, Will," chuckled Bluff; "because you know there's that dicker I wanted to make with you for that new hunting knife I took such a fancy

to. I offered you my old one and something to boot in the bargain. Now I understood from the way you acted the deal wasn't pleasant to you; so please get it over with as soon as possible."

"I'll see you in Guinea, Bluff, before I trade that splendid blade," retorted the other, "but I told you where I got it, and any time you feel like it you can send for one just like mine. Let it go at that then."

There came another hard pull. Sometimes the way was so rough that all of them panted more or less. Will showed real grit by keeping up with the others, though he had to shut his teeth hard together, and take himself mentally to task when he felt his legs tremble under him with weakness.

All at once Jerry, always the first to discover things, gave vent to a yell.

"Hey there, fellows! I see water ahead through the trees! Yep, it's the big lake as sure as anything! We've got there at last!"

"Good!" muttered Will in an undertone, as though he did not wish the others to hear him; to tell the truth, he felt as though he could not stagger on much further over that rough trail, and carry the heavy pack in the bargain, as well as the new bag containing his precious films.

The sight of the splendid sheet of water seemed to inspire them all with new energy, for they per-

ceptibly quickened their pace until impatient Jerry was almost running in his eagerness to get to his destination.

After a while they found themselves standing on the shore of the inland sea, where the waters were lapping the shore with a murmuring sound that was sweet music in the ears of Frank Langdon.

"Well, one thing's settled anyhow," remarked Will, presently, as he heaved a sigh of relief; "we didn't get lost, did we, fellows?"

"Shucks! that was the last thing to bother me," declared Bluff with a fine appearance of scorn. "For one, I've passed the novice stage in woodcraft, and reckon myself able to get along with the next chap."

"All the same," he was told by Frank, "I've known the time when you *did* manage to lose your bearings and run up against a whole bunch of trouble in consequence."

"But that's past history," remonstrated the other; "and times have changed since then, Frank. I should hope I've learned my lesson by now."

"Now where do you think this Cabin Point lies, that we're going to hunt up, with the idea of making our home there during our stay?" Jerry demanded.

"Just look to the left and I think you'll see a

wooded cape that reaches out into the lake like a tongue or a finger," the pilot explained, pointing as he spoke.

"Frank, you're all to the good there, that must be our goal," Bluff hastened to assert; for indeed since there was no other similar projection of the shore in sight, it seemed reasonable to believe Cabin Point was before their eyes.

"We'll soon settle that matter," observed Frank, once more making a start.

They did not have far to go, for the half-concealed and wholly overgrown trail reached the lake close to the wooded cape. Perhaps long before, when loggers had a camp in that region while felling the virgin growth of forest, the point of land was a favorite camp with them. That would account for the trail, and why it had grown up in recent years.

Once on the ground, they began to look earnestly for signs of the abandoned cabin which it was hoped would afford them shelter during their outing. For some little time this search bore no fruit, and Will was beginning to feel quite disconsolate.

"Looks to me as if it was going to be our job to start a brush shanty that will give us shelter for a couple of nights till we can put up a more substantial affair," he told Bluff, who hap-

pened to be close to him, looking to the right and to the left in a vain attempt to be the first one to make a pleasant discovery.

Will had hardly spoken when they heard a call from Jerry.

"I might have known it was no good trying to beat his sharp eyes out," grumbled Bluff, as though really disappointed because he had failed to locate the cabin.

"What difference does it make who turns the trick?" ventured Will, looking happy again; "so long as it's done. The end and not the means is what counts. Hello! Jerry, have you struck pay dirt?"

"Here it is!" came the triumphant answer, and the others hurried forward, to discover the log structure partly concealed from view by branches of trees, vines, moss, and every sort of green growth.

"No wonder we couldn't see it easily," expostulated Bluff; "everybody doesn't happen to have microscopic eyes like Jerry here. I warrant you now I passed within thirty feet of this spot several times, and never tumbled to what was so close by."

"One of the first things we'll do, fellows," suggested Frank, "will be to get busy and cut down a lot of this stuff that keeps us from hav-

ing a fine outlook over the bay and the big lake beyond."

"How about the cabin itself?" asked Will. "Seems to me the chimney is sort of dilapidated on top."

"That can be soon remedied, and I'll take care of it," Frank assured him. "Then this door is hanging on one rusty hinge; we'll find a way to stand it up again. Let's step inside and look around a bit; I'm more anxious about the roof than almost anything else, for that's apt to leak like a sieve until we fix it."

"Go a little slow," Will warned them, "for I've known of wild cats or other wild beasts taking up their quarters in an abandoned cabin." This remark caused Bluff and Jerry to laugh, for they could themselves look back to a ludicrous experience of the kind.

It turned out that the cabin had no ferocious occupant and upon investigation they found that the roof was not very bad after all.

"In one corner only it looks as if the rain had come in," said Frank finally; "or water when the snow melted, which tries a roof more than anything else. Why, given half a day and we shall have a weather-proof top all over. Take note of that big yawning fireplace, will you? I can see what jolly times we'll have sitting around

there on cool nights; and up here we're apt to have many such."

"We can make bunks against this wall where you can see the remains of two right now," Bluff intimated.

"Until then we'll spread our blankets on the floor and rough it, which suits me all right," Jerry announced.

Will had lowered his burdens to the floor. He seemed anxious to get settled after some fashion. First of all he opened the new bag. The other boys were still looking curiously around, finding a number of interesting features connected with the lone cabin on the point, when they heard Will give a cry of utter astonishment. Turning quickly they saw him staring down into the bag he had opened, with a look of consternation on his face.

CHAPTER IV

AS BUSY AS BEAVERS

"WHAT under the sun ails Will?" demanded Bluff.

"It's his bag, don't you understand?" added Jerry. "Something's happened to upset him terribly. He looks as if he'd seen a ghost. Ten chances to one now he forgot to put the films in."

"What is it, Will?" called out Frank, who, being busy just then, had only turned his head when the cry bubbled from the other's lips.

"Oh! Frank, they're gone!" gasped Will.

"What's that? Do you mean your films?" demanded the other.

"Yes, oh yes, gone, worse luck! I don't understand it at all. Seems as though I must be dreaming, Frank!" and Will began to rub his eyes vigorously, as though by that means he hoped to get his proper sight back; after which he stared again at the open bag on the floor.

"You're dead sure you put them in the bag,

are you, Will?" questioned the skeptical Jerry.

"Of course I am!" he was indignantly told. "But I can't understand where these silly things came from. They don't belong to me, that's sure."

"Hello! here's a mystery all right," said Bluff, scrambling to his feet and hurrying over to the other; in which action he was immediately imitated by the other two.

"Well, I declare that's queer!" burst out Jerry; "a lot of golf balls, a white sweater, and a pair of rubber-soled shoes! Why, Will, what has happened?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said the bewildered one, shaking his head sadly. "Here I pack my films and a few other little things in this new bag, and start out. Then when I open it, see what I get! Who's been playing a trick on me, I'd like to know?"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Frank, just when the injured one was beginning to frown and look suspiciously at Bluff and Jerry; "nobody here has had a hand in the thing, Will; but I think I know what happened."

"Then for goodness' sake, Frank, hurry up and tell us!" cried Bluff; "for Will here is beginning to have awful thoughts, and looks at me as if he could eat me."

"Yes, please explain the mystery, Frank, if you can," pleaded Will.

"To my mind it's as simple as anything could well be," began the other, soberly.

"You remember our meeting on the road with the young chap calling himself Gilbert something or other? Well, I happened to notice that the bag he carried was as near like your new one as two peas could be. When he hurried away to catch his train in his excitement he must have unconsciously picked up the wrong bag!"

"Then this one belongs to him, does it?" asked Jerry.

"Don't you remember," remarked Frank, "his saying something about his being runner-up in the amateur class of golfers, and that he was going to a tournament right then, which accounted for his haste?"

Will uttered a deep groan. He was evidently very much dejected over the unfortunate accident that had befallen him so early in their outing.

"What tough luck I've struck!" he said, as he stared down at the golf balls, as useless to him as so many stones. "I do hope that chap won't be so mad when he finds out what he's done as to destroy my precious films. What if he went and put a match to them? You know they'd flame

up something fierce, and it'd be good-bye to all my hard work up in Maine."

"Oh! the chances are small that he'd be so venomous as all that," returned Frank, "especially when he must know it was all his own fault."

"But what do you think he'll do about it?" questioned Bluff.

"If I were Gilbert," suggested Jerry, drily, "my first job would be to hire some caddy with a heavy foot to kick me good and hard. Then I'd set out to get a new sweater and another supply of golf balls. Later on I'd make it a point to head back this way and hunt you up, to apologize humbly and to hand over your bag intact."

"Well said, Jerry," was Frank's hearty commendation.

Will picked up a little hope at that. Perhaps after all matters might not be quite so bad as they looked at first glance. Even if he did lose a week of time, there were plenty of other things he could be doing, since he had his camera and flashlight apparatus intact.

"Thanks, Jerry. I guess you are right," he told the other. "Every cloud has a silver lining, they say, if only you look for it. I'll try to hope for the best after this. My precious films may come back to me again undamaged. I hope

so, anyway; but you know there's no telling what a fellow may do when in a sudden rage."

"Think again, Will," said Frank. "We all agreed that this Gilbert fellow was as cool a customer as we'd ever met. Now the chances are he'll grasp the situation at a glance, laugh at his blunder, put *your* bag safely away, and hustle to remedy the mistake so as not to be left out of the tournament. Believe that, Will, for your own peace of mind."

So the forlorn chum finally fastened the bag and hung it on a peg.

"I hope to see it give way to my own bag by the time a week or so has passed," he forced himself to say.

As the afternoon was getting well along the boys busied themselves with what appeared to be the most urgent duties. Such things as roof mending and the like could wait for another time, since there did not seem to be any possibility of a storm coming up, on that night at least.

"But we must surely pay attention to that roof the first thing to-morrow," Frank told them, as they began to make preparations for the cooking fire.

"Yes, that's right," Jerry added; "because we mustn't be like the Irishman in the old story who never did mend the hole in his roof, although

always going to do so; and when they asked why he kept putting it off explained by saying: 'Whin it rains I *can't* mind it, and whin it's dry and fair, be jabers! phy should I bother?' "

Of course things were in something of a turmoil that evening, though the boys were beginning to plan just how they meant to store their possessions away so as to have their customary system about the cabin camp.

When the odors of supper began to fill the interior of the cabin the boys discovered that their camp appetites were already beginning to manifest themselves. They certainly appreciated that first meal in the open. It brought back to memory many other camps they had enjoyed together.

And later on while sitting around in front of the blazing fire it was only natural that the talk should be of those earlier events, which have been set down in such an interesting way between the covers of previous volumes of this series.

Having no cots or bunks as yet, they spread their blankets on the hard floor, and after this crude fashion settled down for the first night. None of them expected to obtain a good rest, because the first night out is always a wakeful one on account of strange surroundings. But in due time all this would wear away and in

the end it might even prove to be a difficult task to arouse some of the heavy sleepers at sunrise.

After breakfast the next morning all of them set to work. Even Will was not allowed to begin with his beloved photography until some semblance of order had been brought about.

They had brought a few tools along with them, Frank resting under the belief that a hand-saw, a hammer, and some nails would not come in amiss when they meant to start housekeeping in an old cabin that might need considerable repairing to make it habitable.

It was this habit of looking ahead possessed by Frank Langdon that so often made things much easier for himself and his chums than they might otherwise have been.

So while Frank busied himself at the roof, he had one of the others mending the door, and the remainder of the party searching for wood that could be utilized in making their rude bunks along the wall.

It was found that they could take down some boards that were really not needed, and saw them into the necessary strips required. So during the entire morning there was more or less hammering and sawing going on that must have greatly astonished the timid little woods folk

dwelling in that vicinity, so long given over to solitude and quiet.

At noontime things began to look a little shipshape. To begin with, the roof had been repaired, and Frank believed it would turn water in any storm short of a cloud-burst. Then the door also was swinging on two hinges, one of stout leather, also carried in Frank's pack for an emergency.

The four bunks were coming along nicely, and the amateur carpenters who worked on them promised a complete job before nightfall.

"And now," said Frank, as they munched a cold lunch at noon, having decided not to go to the bother of doing any cooking at that time, "I want Will to come with me to make a little search for that old boat we were told could be found hidden under a shelving rock near the shore. It hasn't been used for some years, and is apt to be in poor shape, but I've got some oakum and a calking tool. With those, I hope to put it in condition, so with frequent baling we can use it on the lake."

They made a systematic search all along the shore, but it was not until nearly an hour had passed that they discovered the spot where, under a shelf of rock, the old craft lay.

After making an examination, Frank declared

he could mend the rowboat so that it would afford them more or less pleasure. Its planks had survived many a winter, thanks to the protection afforded by the shelf of rock.

Since the gaps in the open seams were so large that it would leak like a sieve, he realized his work would have to be done at the spot where the boat was found. This meant only a tramp of a quarter of a mile at most, going and coming.

"I'll get busy the first thing in the morning," Frank told Will. "Altogether, the job oughtn't to take me more than a day. Then we can all get together and drag the boat down to the water, and one of us can paddle around to Cabin Point, where there's a splendid cove to tie up in."

"The oars are good enough for our use, though splintered some," suggested the other.

"That will save us a hard job," Frank admitted, "because I don't think I ever shaped an oar in my life, and it's no little task, believe me!"

In their wanderings the boys had discovered a stream that emptied into the lake. Frank promised himself the pleasure of following it up some day, and finding what the country looked like in that direction.

"I've got a notion," he told Will, "that this stream runs through the property of that old hermit, Aaron Dennison; at least that's what one

man told me. Perhaps he'll take it badly when he learns that a parcel of boys have squatted down for a month's stay so close to his place."

"I hope we do run across the queer old man some of these fine days," ventured Will; "and that I'm carrying my camera along with me, because I'd like to snap off the picture of a real hermit. I've got some odd people in my collection, but nothing so queer as that. I surely would like to get him."

On arriving at the cabin they found the other pair had been exceedingly industrious during their absence. The sleeping quarters were beginning to look shipshape, and promised more or less comfort when completed.

"Now if you fellows would only turn in and give us a helping hand," suggested Jerry, "we could get through in a couple of hours."

"Just what I was going to propose on my own account," Frank told him. "Many hands make light work, you know. So tell us what you want done, and we'll get busy."

All of them being handy with tools, they made a good job of the bunks. Indeed, considering what poor material they had to work with, the result did them great credit.

"Now who's going to be the first to pick his bunk?" laughed Will, when it was decided there

could be nothing more done to make the sleeping quarters comfortable.

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Frank, when unconsciously all faces were turned toward him. "Every fellow is going to have a square show. Here, I'll hold four splinters of wood in my hand, all of different lengths. Each one draw, and the longest has first choice."

"That's a fair bargain," agreed Bluff, "though for my part one bunk is pretty much like another."

It turned out that Will was given first choice, and he took a lower berth, for they had been arranged in sections of two, on account of limited room. Frank, having second pick, took the one above, and the others then divided the remaining two between them.

After they had arranged their warm blankets, the place began to take on quite a cheery appearance.

"We'll get at that cranky table next, and steady it," said Frank; "then we need another bench, because as it is we have to use blocks of wood for seats. In fact, I can already see a dozen things to be done, with more to follow."

Jerry in passing across the cabin tripped, and uttered a grunt as though he had stubbed his toe.

"That makes three times that loose plank has caught me," he muttered, "and the old motto says 'three times and out.' So I'll just yank that plank up and settle it down afresh. A few of those big spikes you brought along ought to do the trick, Frank."

Accordingly the determined boy set about carrying this little plan into execution. Prying up one end of the plank, he managed to get a grip of it, and then raised it completely. It came up much more easily than Jerry had anticipated.

"Why, hello!" the others heard him say, "here's an old rat's nest made years ago, I should think; and look what's lying beside it, will you?"

CHAPTER V

A CALL FOR HELP

JERRY was holding something up when he said this, which he had just picked out of the cavity under the loose plank.

"Why, it looks as though it had once been a baby's shoe, I should say," suggested Frank.

"Just what it is, but as old as the hills," remarked Jerry. "I wonder now, did it slip down here, or was it carried by the old mother rat when this nest was made?"

He fumbled among the scraps of paper and such stuff that had gone to form the nest of the rodent. One piece seemed to be a part of an envelope. The writing was fairly visible, though age had yellowed the paper.

"What do you think of this, fellows?" Jerry demanded, as though interested. "I can make out part of a name here, and whose do you reckon it is?"

"Oh, tell, and don't keep a fellow guessing!" urged Bluff impatiently.

"The word Aaron is as plain as anything," pursued Jerry, "and then there's part of the next one Denni—so you see it really looks as if away back, twenty years ago or perhaps even much longer, the rich old hermit used to actually live here in this log cabin. In those days he was land poor, mebbe; and say, the shoe—why, he must have had a wife, and a baby, too!"

All of them looked at the poor little memento of the dim past which had been discovered under such singular conditions. Then Jerry commenced smoothing the earth level under the plank so that it would set more evenly. In the midst of this he uttered another exclamation.

"All sorts of queer things are coming my way, I tell you!" he called out. "See what I've dug up now!"

"Looks like a half dollar," remarked Bluff decidedly interested. "And see here, if you've struck a miser's hoard, remember we're all chums, Jerry; it's share alike, I hope."

A vigorous hunt failed to disclose any mate of the coin, and in the end they were compelled to believe it must be only a lone specimen.

"Perhaps old Aaron was a money grabber in those days," Bluff ventured, "and laid the foundation for his fortune while living here in this cabin. And this hole under the loose plank—wouldn't it

be just the jolliest hiding-place for a miser to stow his valuables in?"

"Either that," added Frank thoughtfully, "or else the half dollar managed to slip down through a crack. Have you examined it to see the date, Jerry? Because if it happens to be one that was coined within the last half-dozen years we'd know it couldn't have been left here long ago."

"I can make it out easily enough, Frank; and it's away back in eighteen-eighty. So that allows plenty of leeway, you see."

The little incident gave them considerable food for exchanging opinions. They even tried to picture what the cabin on the Point may have looked like many years ago, when a woman's hands took care of the home, and the prattle of a child sounded among those great trees overhead.

Still, none of the boys dreamed that the cavity under the floor would play a part in the future happenings that were destined to come their way, though such proved to be the case.

The second night things began to shape themselves much more comfortably. All of the boys declared they had enjoyed a sound sleep when dawn once more found them stirring, and ready to take up the new duties of the day.

One thing after another was finished, and it gave them considerable satisfaction to find how

much of an improvement this sort of work made in the cabin and surroundings.

Frank himself cut away much of the thick growth of bushes and branches that interfered with their view of the big water. When he had completed his task it was possible to look from the open door and see for miles out over the lake. They believed they would never tire of watching the play of the waves that at times could be heard so plainly breaking on the shore near by.

There was seldom a time during daylight when some fish-hawk could not be seen sailing serenely over the water, looking for a fish for his young fledglings. On several occasions the boys also discovered a bald-headed eagle wheeling far up in the blue space overhead.

"We must keep on the watch to learn how the bold robber taxes the hard-working and honest fish-hawks for his meal," Frank remarked. "It's too much bother for the eagle to plunge down and hook a fish for himself, so he waits until an osprey gets one, then follows him up into the air and makes him drop his prize."

Will, of course, was deeply interested. Everything that pertained to animal nature appealed irresistibly to him these days, since he had taken to securing pictures of wild birds and animals in their native haunts.

"I've read about such things, but never had the good luck to see it done," he hastened to remark. "I hope I can make use of my camera if it happens to come along at the right time. Already I think I know where a pair of those big ospreys have their nest, and that ought to make a dandy picture, with one of the parent birds feeding the youngsters."

"I'd go a little slow about it if I were you," Frank cautioned him. "They make their homes up in pretty tall trees, you know. And besides, some of them are savage fighters when they think their nests are going to be disturbed or robbed."

The others forgot about the fish-hawks after that, but not Will. When he had anything on his mind he was very persistent. This was particularly true of such matters as were connected with his hobby along the line of photography.

Several days passed, and the other boys were enjoying themselves greatly. For that matter, so was Will, though his activities ran along a single groove. Let those who cared to fish sit out there on the lake all they wished; or troll along, using minnows for bait, which had been taken in a little net made of mosquito bar stuff; Will preferred to roam the adjacent woods seeking signs of minks, raccoons, opossums and foxes, and planning just how he would arrange his traps so

that at night time the animals would set off his flashlight, and have their pictures taken unawares in so doing.

All the little chores had been completed around the cabin, which looked quite like another place now. It was kept as neat as wax, for Frank had even manufactured an odd but effective broom out of twigs, such as he had seen used by immigrants from abroad.

Frank was contemplating the taking of a little tramp up the stream on the following day. He had not forgotten what one of his informants had told him concerning the hermit's place, and was more than curious to meet Aaron Dennison.

Will had not ceased to remember his loss. He brooded over it at times, and even broke out into occasional lamentations. His greatest fear seemed to be that Gilbert might destroy the films in his sudden disgust on discovering what a wretched blunder he had committed in his haste.

Will had wandered forth after lunch on this day. From the fact that he carried his camera along with him, the rest of the boys judged he meant to secure some view that had appealed to him as especially fine.

It was some hours later that Frank noticed that he had not returned. Will was a fair woodsman by now, and there did not seem to be much

chance of his allowing himself to become lost. Still Frank found himself wondering just where the boy had gone, and why Will had not taken any of them into his confidence.

When it was but an hour from sunset he mentioned the matter to the rest.

"Does anybody happen to know where Will set out for?" was his question.

No one did, for both Bluff and Jerry shook their heads in the negative, while the last named remarked:

"He was busy working at something or other this morning. I didn't get on to it, and meant to ask him, but forgot all about it. I saw him fasten a piece of rope around him and enclose a tree out there. It made me laugh at the time, and only that Bluff called me just then I would have joshed him about trying to play Indian, and tying himself face on to a tree."

Frank chuckled at hearing that.

"You've given me a clue already, Jerry," he observed. "I remember that Will seemed set on getting a picture of that osprey nest he had discovered. You know the old trick some South Sea islanders practice when climbing cocoanut trees is to have a loop around the trunk and their own body, then barefooted hoist themselves bit by bit, always raising the loop as they go."

"Whew! and so Will thought he could do the same thing, did he, and get up to the first limb high above his head. But say, Frank, what if something has happened to him?"

Jerry looked uneasy when he said this, and Bluff, too, picked up his hat as though ready to set out in search of Will.

"We must look into this, that's a fact, boys!" declared Frank; whereupon they hurried out of doors.

"Listen!" cried Frank almost immediately. "Seems to me I heard a call some distance away and along the shore. Yes, there it is again, and I reckon that's our chum giving tongue. He must be in difficulty and he needs help, so come on," at which the three of them started to run at full speed eastward.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOME OF THE OSPREY

"Coming, Will!" shouted Bluff as he ran back of Frank.

"This way, along the shore!" they plainly heard a voice call from some distance away.

Of course anxious thoughts chased through the minds of the three boys as they hurried along. Will was evidently in trouble. Bluff, remembering the ospreys, pictured him lying at the foot of a tall tree with perhaps one of his legs broken. That would be an awkward condition of affairs to be sure, with their camp so far removed from real civilization.

Jerry, too, was imagining something of the sort, and wondering if they would have to make a litter in order to carry poor Will back to the cabin. He even went further and considered the question as to how they could take him to a doctor; or else force the old hermit of the Dennison estate to let them carry their injured comrade there.

Not so Frank. He had already made the discovery that the voice came from up in the air, and hence had quite settled in his mind what had happened.

"He got up all right, you see, fellows," was the way Frank explained it to the others, "but it wasn't so easy to creep down again. Perhaps he dropped the rope he had used, and couldn't clasp the trunk of the tree because it was so large."

"We'll soon know," ventured Jerry, "because I can see one of the fish-hawks flying over that tall tree, and I guess the nest must be in that."

"Here he is over here, you see," observed Frank. "He figured out that with the sun heading into the west he ought to get on that side of the nest in order to make a fine picture. So he climbed up and settled himself, waiting until the mother bird came with a fish for the fledglings, which may have taken hours."

"I see him!" cried Bluff. "There, he's waving to us now! And I'm glad to know our chum hasn't gone and broken a leg; for besides the pain to him it would upset all our fine plans for a good time up here."

Will was sitting astride the lowermost limb of an enormous tree standing about forty or fifty feet to the west of the one in which the nest of the ospreys could be plainly seen, close to the top.

Will grinned sheepishly as his chums came underneath. He was some thirty feet from the ground as his legs dangled over the lowermost limb. And Frank, remembering his theory, on looking at the base of the tree discovered that the rope loop did lie there. Will had inadvertently allowed it to slip from his grasp after reaching the lower branch and clambering up on to it.

He had removed his shoes and socks in order to make good use of his toes in climbing, just as do the blacks of the cocoanut islands. But later on, after getting his long delayed pictures of the old osprey feeding its fledglings, when the ardent photographer attempted to descend the big tree he found it an impossible task.

The trunk was far too thick for him to clasp with arms and legs. Will was not an athlete, though able to climb an ordinary tree if pushed. He always claimed that he could go up any kind if a bull were after him; but evidently here was a tree he could not descend, at least.

Just how long he had sat there on that lower limb trying to conjure up some possible plan that would take him in safety to the ground, they never knew. Will felt a little ashamed to be found in such a plight, and kept putting off his call for assistance as long as he dared.

When, however, he found that night was only

an hour or so off, and realized that unless he pocketed his pride, he stood a chance of spending many gloomy hours aloft with only the osprey family for neighbors, he started to shout.

"If only I had that loop up here I could get down easily enough, I think, Frank," he called out as the three boys lined up below him.

"Perhaps you could, and again there's some doubt whether you'd be able to get inside the loop," Frank told him. "The easiest way to do is for one of us to run back to the cabin and fetch our rope. With a few trials I can toss the end into your hands or over the limb, then you can lower yourself."

Both Jerry and Bluff agreed that this was a good plan. The former even offered to act as messenger and get the article needed for the rescue work. He was gone only a short time, during which Frank asked a few questions, and learned that Will believed he had secured a number of "cracking good" pictures of the osprey group that would make a fine addition to his collection.

Frank made several casts upward before he was able to send the end of the rope over the limb, and within reach of the straddling boy. It proved to be just long enough, doubled, to reach within five feet of the ground.

"First I want to make sure of my camera," Will told them, and as they knew he would positively refuse to budge an inch unless his treasured black box were taken care of, Jerry told him to lower away.

After that had been done Will prepared to trust himself on the doubled rope.

"Have a care," said Frank, "and make sure of each grip as you go. There, you're all right now, I guess, so come along down."

"Take it slow if you don't want to burn your hands, Will!" Bluff cautioned him.

Without accident, Will managed to reach the ground. His first act was to snatch up his camera and look it over, sighing with satisfaction when he found it had received no injury.

"Get on your shoes and come along back home," Frank advised him, and the exciting little incident was closed.

Later on Will told them how patiently he had sat there, perched in the top of the tall tree next to the one containing the fish-hawks' nest, and waiting for a good chance to take the picture he wanted.

"The wind blew at first, and the tree-top rocked so that it almost made me sea-sick," he went on to say, with a sigh; "but after an hour or so this let up. Then came one of the ospreys with a big

fish in its claws, and I began to get busy. I snapped off every bit of the film as I saw fine group pictures come up; and I do hope they all turn out well."

As he had a daylight developing tank with him he wasted little time in ascertaining this fact. His exuberant shouts announced later on that his success was all the heart of any ambitious amateur photographer could wish for. And indeed, when the exposed films were passed around after they had sufficiently dried it was seen that Will had done himself justice, for they were perfectly clear.

Frank himself could easily understand just how this fad was able to grip any one who took it up. He believed that it was much more interesting and profitable than hunting with a gun. In the one case all the result consisted of game that was soon eaten and forgotten; but those instructive pictures of timid animals and wild birds would give pleasure for an unlimited time.

"There's one thing I think we ought to get busy about, fellows," Frank remarked that evening as they sat around the rough table enjoying the supper Jerry had prepared; "and that is see what can be done about laying in a fresh stock of butter and eggs."

"Our supply of both is about down to the limit,

for a fact," admitted Bluff, who was unusually fond of eggs, "fried, boiled, scrambled, and, in fact, any old way," as he himself always declared.

"Have you any plan by which we can get a new lot, and perhaps some fresh milk in the bargain?" Will sought to learn.

"So far as we know, there's only one house within several miles of this place," explained Frank, "and that belongs to the man they call a hermit because he keeps to himself, and never goes to town—Aaron Dennison."

"A likely chance we'd have of getting any supplies from him, I should say!" grumbled Jerry; but Bluff was quick to make a proposal.

"If you are thinking of going up that creek, and paying a visit to Aaron, I hope you will choose me to go along. Remember, I spoke first!" he called out.

Will looked disappointed. He had hoped that if ever they decided to call on the crabbed owner of the Dennison estate he might be along with his camera. And seeing this disappointed expression cross his face, Frank easily understood what it signified.

"Another time you can come, Will," he explained. "Just now we don't even know whether there really is a house inside of five miles. It's

only hearsay with us, you remember. If we should manage to get friendly with Aaron, why, we'll be apt to wander up there many times, and you may come across your chance before a great while."

With that, Will had to rest content. In fact, he had another little plan of his own in mind, which he meant to work out on the following day. Frank suspected as much, though he really hoped it would not be of the same risky nature as getting the snapshots of the ospreys.

In the morning the two who had planned to follow up the stream and learn if it passed through the estate of Aaron Dennison waved their hands to Jerry and Will, after which they started along the shore.

After they reached the creek at the point where it emptied into the bay, they turned their backs on the big water, and plunged into the thick growth.

"How about this thing, Frank; do you really and truly mean this expedition to be a foraging one, with fresh eggs and butter in view; or is it that you just hope to get in touch with old Aaron Dennison, and see what a genuine hermit looks like?"

Bluff put this direct question after they had been making their way along the tortuous bank

of the winding creek for nearly half an hour. Such difficulties as crosesd their path had been easily overcome, for both boys were pretty good woodsmen, and accustomed to getting around in the wilderness.

"Take my word for it," he was assured by his chum, "I'm out for the grub above all things; though of course I admit to having a little curiosity about this mysterious Mr. Dennison. I've heard a lot of queer things about his doings. He has a pretty fine place away up here, but keeps it surrounded by a high fence, and they even say it has a strand or two of terrible barbed wire on top of the fence, to discourage any one from climbing over."

"Gee whiz! I hope he doesn't own a pack of wolf dogs that would make a jump for stray boys that chanced to get in the grounds."

"I asked particularly about that," said Frank, who somehow seemed to think of nearly everything, "and no one could remember ever seeing any around. So just as like as not the old man doesn't fancy dogs."

"Yes, there are people who shiver every time they meet a collie or a mastiff," admitted Bluff, "though for my part I've always liked all breeds. I believe a dog is man's best friend, as faithful as life itself."

"Well, here we are," remarked Frank, with a ring of satisfaction in his voice.

"It's a high fence, sure enough," said Bluff, "with barbed wire strung across where the creek comes out under it, so even a fox would find it hard to get through. How shall we manage it, Frank?"

"First of all, we'll move along the fence. There may happen to be a board loose where we can slip through. That would be better than trying the gate, to be turned down flat-footed."

They had not gone fifty feet before Bluff discovered the loose board they sought. It required only a small amount of agility to pass through the opening, after which they walked along through the woods on the other side of the high fence.

Presently they came in sight of a long, low house, which was half hidden amidst dense foliage, and looked, as Bluff called it, "spooky."

Straight up to the door of this building the two boys strode, and Frank without hesitation rapped loudly with his knuckles.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHAINED DOOR

It seemed to the two boys that Frank's knock sounded weirdly through the house, though it did not bring any immediate result. Accordingly, he again brought his knuckles against the door panel, this time with even greater force than before.

"That fetched them, Frank," muttered Bluff. "I can hear somebody shuffling along the hall and heading this way."

Presently they heard a bolt withdrawn, a rather ponderous affair it seemed; and somehow this struck Frank as rather queer. Why should any one living so far away from town, and off the beaten track of travel, take such pains to secure his door?

"Gee whiz! I shouldn't think they'd ever be bothered with hoboes or sneak thieves away up in this part of the country," whispered Bluff, who always had a mind of his own and was hard to repress.

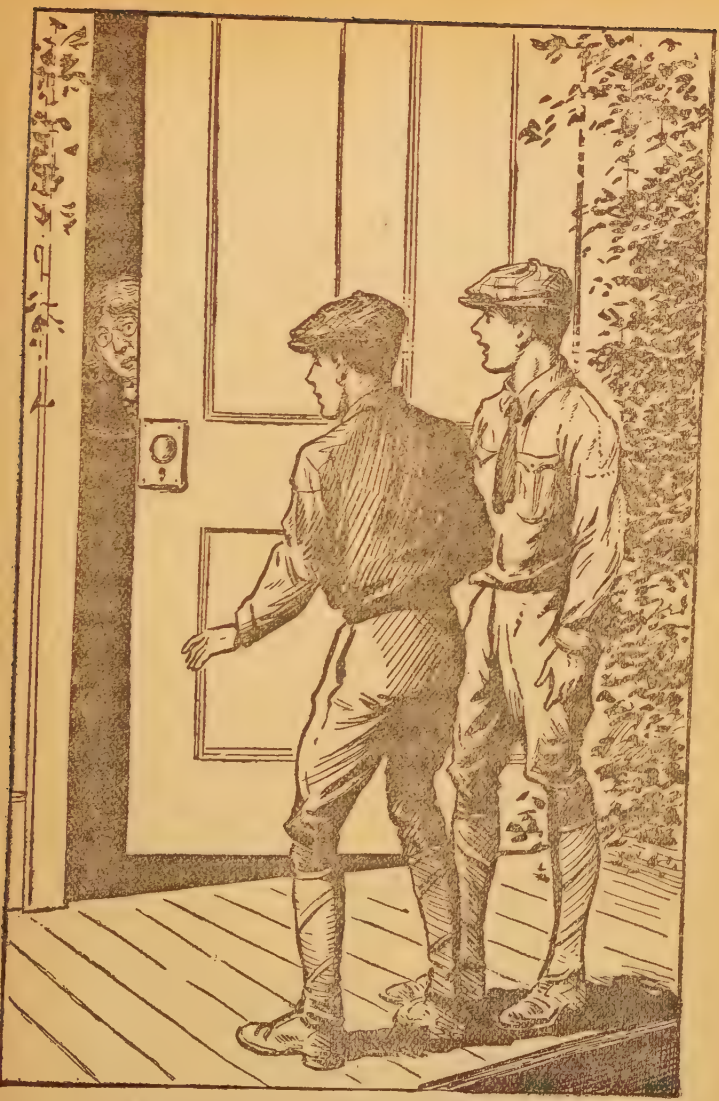
The door was slowly and cautiously opened. Frank saw that it was still held by a stout chain, so that no one outside could enter against the will of the inmates. It made him think of one of the old feudal castles he had lately been reading about in Sir Walter Scott's romances, where they had draw-bridges, moats, and a port-cullis to protect them against assault.

A face was seen in the narrow opening. It was an old face, wrinkled, so that at first Frank imagined it might belong to Aaron himself. Then he discovered his mistake, for the white hair belonged to a woman, evidently the housekeeper of the hermit.

She looked more or less frightened at first, and no wonder, because such a resounding knock as Frank had given might have seemed backed by authority. When she discovered just two friendly looking boys standing there astonishment crept over the features of the woman.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she asked a little sharply, as though annoyed because they had given her such a sudden start.

"My name is Frank Langdon, and this is my chum, Bluff Masters. We are camping for our holidays down in the old cabin on the Point. We ran out of butter and eggs, and came up here hoping we might be able to buy some."



A FACE WAS SEEN IN THE NARROW OPENING.

Frank made it as simple as he could. He did not even mention the fact that they had ever heard there was such a singular person as Aaron Dennison in all the wide world. It was his intention to appear as though he looked upon this place as an ordinary farmhouse, where hospitality might be supposed to abide, and a friendly call on the part of decent boys would not be taken amiss.

The woman looked a little more keenly at Frank, but at the same time she shook her head in the negative. Bluff grunted to himself. He took that as a bad sign, and immediately concluded that they would have to go back to camp with as empty hands as they had come.

"Nothing doing," was what Bluff was saying to himself just then, while the old housekeeper hesitated; "she's got her orders. Old Aaron doesn't fancy boys, I guess. We'll be mighty lucky if he doesn't see fit to order us out of that cabin we've gone to all the trouble to fix bang-up."

Then the housekeeper spoke.

"I'm sorry, but you mustn't expect to get anything here. This place belongs to Mr. Aaron Dennison. No doubt you have heard of him. He has lived here almost alone for many years now, and will brook no intrusion. That is why

the fence has been built around the estate, with the wire on top, and locked gates. How did you get inside?"

"We came to a loose board and passed through, not meaning any harm," replied Frank, who imagined the old housekeeper was inclined to be human, but having her strict orders from her employer dared not act in a friendly manner toward them.

"I shall have to report your being here to Mr. Dennison, and I am afraid that he will be very much annoyed. He would never brook intruders, and has a violent temper when aroused. I hope you will go away at once, and come no more."

"Then you can't let us have any supplies, I suppose?" asked Bluff, bent on squeezing the orange dry, and not throwing the skin away as long as there remained a single chance for extracting a drop of juice.

"I would not dare to do it, though if I had my own way—but no matter, you must not stay here a minute longer. Even now he may have heard the knock, and come to investigate. It is most unusual; we have not had a visitor for years. I wish I could oblige you, but it is impossible. Good-bye!"

With that she closed the door in the faces of

the astonished, as well as amused, campers, and Bluff burst into a series of low chuckles.

"Wow! but doesn't that beat the Dutch?" he exclaimed, as though overpowered by the humorous aspect of the adventure. "Listen to her pushing that monster bolt into its socket. Gee whiz! I never knew before I looked so dangerous. I'll have to cultivate a new sort of grin, because the one I practice now didn't have any effect on the old lady."

"Let's move along, Bluff. There's no use in our staying here any longer after having the door slammed in our faces," said the amazed Frank.

Together they started slowly away from the house, glancing back curiously over their shoulders several times, for they wished to remember what the mysterious building looked like.

"Will must manage to get up here some time," Bluff was saying, "because I'd just like to have him get a picture of the place as we see it now. Then if ever we happen to hear anybody speak of old Dennison and his hide-out we can flash that view before them."

They had almost reached the place where the loose board had afforded them ingress to the enclosed grounds belonging to the estate when a strange sound came stealing to their ears. Both

boys instantly stopped and listened to learn if it was repeated, but such did not come to pass.

"What in the dickens do you suppose that was, Frank?" demanded Bluff, turning his face, marked by a commingling of wonder and awe, on his comrade.

"Tell me what you think first," the other replied.

"I'll be switched if I know, Frank! It just went through me like a knife, it was so queer. If this were the middle of the night now I might mention ghosts, because if there were such things I'd imagine them making just about that sort of a sound."

Frank laughed at that.

"Well, since this is broad daylight," he observed, "and ghosts are said never to walk except around twelve at night, we'll have to look somewhere else for our explanation. Now I've known a chained dog to make a noise like that, a sort of half bay, half growl that would give you a start until you found out the cause."

"But we've understood they keep no dog up here," urged Bluff. "And if they did have one wouldn't he have scented us, and started barking long ago?"

"What you say sounds reasonable enough, Bluff," Frank admitted. "It couldn't have been

a donkey braying either, because we know how they drag it out. Besides unless I'm mistaken the sound came straight from the direction of the house itself."

"Sure it did," said Bluff, as they started to pass through the gap that could be made by swinging the loose board aside. "I wonder if old Aaron learned of our being there, and gave that yawp to show his anger. I'm almost sorry now we didn't meet the gentleman face to face."

"Perhaps it's just as well, from what the housekeeper said," replied Frank, although secretly he was even more disappointed than his chum.

"Then of course you wouldn't dream of going back to look around in hopes of finding out what that queer noise, almost like a shriek, meant?" pursued Bluff, in a wheedling tone.

"I guess not this time," decided the other; "it's really none of our business, you know, and our errand at the Dennison place has ended in smoke. We'll have to settle on trying at that village we can see miles away along the lake shore. Perhaps to-morrow you and Jerry can take the boat and row over there."

"Oh! Barkis is willing, all right, because we just can't keep house without our fresh eggs and butter, you know."

So it was settled. Bluff, always desiring action, was satisfied with this half plan made for the future. In his active mind he began immediately to picture all sorts of exciting things happening on the contemplated cruise along the lake shore to the distant village in search of the needed supplies.

Frank happened to come upon what looked like an old path leading toward the lake, and decided to follow it instead of keeping down the stream with its zigzag course. Sure enough it took them directly to Cabin Point, although in many places the bushes had sadly overgrown the trail, and walking was not easy.

"Still, you must notice," Frank remarked, "that some one has come along this way every once in a while, because there are footprints, and the twigs have been bent down."

"Mebbe one of the men employed on the Dennison place comes down for a swim, or to look after some night line he's set here for trout," suggested Bluff.

On their arrival at the camp, the two boys had to give an account of their little adventure in detail, for the benefit of those who had stayed behind. Will in particular asked many eager questions.

"If you ever go up there again, Frank," he

told the other seriously, "I do hope I shall be along."

"And I think I can promise you that, Will," replied the other smilingly, as if even then entertaining some thought of a second trip to the place, though evidently he did not care to go deeper into the subject.

Bluff soon started to talk of the trip he and Jerry were to make to the distant village on the next day. Whenever he had a thing on his mind Bluff was apt to chatter about it unendingly.

"We've just got to have those supplies, you understand, Jerry," he told the other, "and since there was nothing doing up at the Dennison ranch, why, our next job is to see if we can make that settlement we glimpse off yonder."

"How far away do you reckon it is?" asked the interested Jerry.

"If you look in my pack, boys," Frank spoke up just then, "you'll find a pair of small but powerful glasses. They may help you figure it out, and may give some idea how the shore lies between Cabin Point and the village."

Bluff went hurriedly for the glasses, and when he returned he and Jerry amused themselves for a long time.

They decided that the village lay all of eight miles off in a straight line, and concluded it

would be a pretty long row in case they chanced to meet contrary wind. In that case the waves would bother them not a little.

Bluff presently proposed that they try to equip the old boat with some sort of sail. Then should they be favored with a wind setting in the right quarter this would save them much hard labor.

Jerry seized the idea eagerly, and before long they were hard at work trying to rig up a make-shift mast and sail out of such material as they could find. It was hardly likely to pass muster so far as looks went, but both boys believed they could make it useful, given half a chance.

That night around the table the talk was largely of the events of the day, and what the morrow was apt to bring forth. Jerry and Bluff entertained high hopes that they were bound to be successful in their foraging expedition; and already counted on an abundance of supplies.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN THE FLASHLIGHT TRAP WORKED

"FRANK, I'm going to ask you to give me a little help in setting my flashlight trap before we go to bed to-night," remarked Will, when they were sitting in front of the fire.

The evening air was nearly always cool, even after a warm day, and it seemed so "jolly," as Jerry called it, to have a small fire crackling on the hearth while they sat around engaged in various tasks and in chatting.

"Then you must have settled on a place from tracks you have found?" inquired Frank.

"Why, yes, and pretty close to the cabin in the bargain," answered the other, whose one hobby had become this method of securing strange pictures of small wild animals caught while in the act of taking the bait in their native haunts.

"What species are you after this time?" asked Frank.

"Somehow I never get an absolutely perfect

snapshot of a 'coon. It seems as if every one has some kind of a blemish; and I told myself that while we were up here at Cabin Point that fault must be remedied if I tried a dozen times. And judging from the tracks of this fellow I think he must be a dandy. I only hope his barred tail shows plainly in his picture."

"That's so," spoke up Bluff, "because his shrewd face and his striped tail make up the main part of any raccoon."

"Why, if the job has to be done, Will, I'd just as soon go with you now. I'll carry my little hand torch, which ought to give us all the light needed, since you say it's close at hand."

Accordingly Will jumped up eagerly to get the necessary things, including the stout cord which was to be used to start the trigger of the trap into action, and set the flashlight going.

"I'm ready Frank, if you are," he soon announced; and together they went forth on their errand, Will just as excited as any hunter could be when creeping up on some coveted game.

Frank immediately noticed one thing, which was that his companion led him along in the direction he and Bluff had taken when coming from the Dennison place. Indeed when the other finally decided that they had arrived at the spot where he had discovered the marks made by the big

raccoon in passing to and from the water's edge, Frank saw evidences of the identical path he and Bluff had followed all the way down. He did not give the fact another thought just then; there was no reason for doing so, since in his mind it was merely a little coincidence.

Having had considerable experience in arranging these clever little traps by which roving night prowlers were made to be their own photographers, Will knew just how to go about it. He fixed his camera in an immovable position, and focussed it in such a fashion that it would catch any object chancing to be within a certain radius at the second the cartridge was fired by means of the cord, pulled by the animal at the bait.

"That seems to be as fine as silk," announced Will, after bending down several times in order to change the camera a trifle, "and if only Mr. 'Coon comes tripping along here to-night he will get his sitting. If you happen to find yourself waked up by a dazzling flash, Frank, please poke me out, because I'd like to come and get my camera. It might rain later in the night, you see, and ruin it for me."

Frank, knowing how much store his comrade set by that little black box, readily gave the desired promise. He entered into all these delightful schemes engineered by Will with his

whole heart. Will had always been different from Bluff and Jerry. Even on their big hunt out in the Rocky Mountains he had never cared as much for getting prize game as the others, his dispostion being more gentle.

Later on the boys concluded it was time to go to bed, since the day had been a busy one for all. Besides, the two who were to row the boat sixteen miles, more or less, on the following day expected to have their hands full.

Some time later all of them were suddenly awakened. It was Bluff who gave the loud exclamation that aroused the others. He afterwards explained that he chanced to be lying awake at the time when a sudden blinding glare dazzled him, which at first he thought to be lightning, though puzzled because no thunder accompanied the flash.

"What is it?" shrilled Jerry, bumping his head as he tried to sit up in such great haste; for the three had opened their eyes in time to catch a part of the fierce glare.

Will was already tumbling out of his bunk, and could be heard chuckling to himself as he started to put on some clothes in the darkness.

"Frank, he did it, all right, you see!" was what Will exclaimed in tones that fairly trembled with eagerness.

"Oh! Great Jehoshaphat! all this row about a measly old 'coon sitting for his picture!" grumbled Jerry, falling back again, and apparently meaning to seek once more relief in slumber, if the bump on his forehead did not hurt too much.

"Better take my hand torch along with you, Will," advised Frank, not thinking it worth while to accompany the other.

"Thank you, I guess I will, Frank, because it's pretty dark out there. I'll be back in a jiffy."

"Whoop it up if the cats tackle you, Will," called out Bluff, but even if the other heard this vague intimation of peril he was too filled with enthusiasm to pay any heed to it, for he kept straight on.

A short time afterwards Frank heard him returning. Then the light came into the cabin, and Will set down his camera.

"The trap was sprung then, was it?" asked Frank sleepily, upon noting this action on the other's part.

"Just what it was! and I certainly hope I got a cracking good picture that time. Old Br'er 'Coon didn't run away with the bait, though, I noticed. It was still there, as good as ever."

"Must have been too badly scared to think of eating," remarked Frank, and as the torch was

extinguished just then, and Will tumbled into his bunk, no more was said.

The rest of the night passed in perfect peace. By now the boys had grown used to hearing the squirrels or other small animals running over the top of the cabin, and paid little attention to the sounds at any time, night or day. So long as they did not drop down the chimney and destroy some of the food, Frank and his chums did not mean to do anything to disturb the merry little creatures as they played hide-and-seek over the roof.

Another day found them all up betimes. Those who cared to do so took a plunge in the cold waters of the lake and rubbed down afterwards, feeling all the better for the experience. Will, however, wanted to discover what luck he had had with his first flashlight exposure of the season; and so he started preparations looking to the development of that particular film, which he could easily do after breakfast was over.

It devolved on Frank to get breakfast that morning. Bluff and Jerry, having hit upon a better way in which to use the sail they had fashioned with so much care on the previous afternoon, were already busily engaged in making changes, just as though for once they were

not thinking of the eternal food question, except so far as new supplies went.

But then Frank could fry the sliced ham as well as any one, and he soon had the coffee, the toast, the fried potatoes, and the meat on the table, after which he called the others.

"Take notice that this is the last of our butter, fellows," remarked the cook as he helped each one in turn to a generous portion of what had just been taken, piping hot, off the red coals on the hearth.

"Oh! that's all right, Frank," said Bluff carelessly, "we expect to have plenty more here before sunset, don't we, Jerry?"

"Simply got to," replied his ally, "if we find it necessary to raid some farmer's hen-coop, gather up the eggs, wring the necks of two pullets, clean out his dairy, and leave the ready cash on the windowsill to settle the bill."

"We're glad to hear you talk that way," laughed Will. "For one I'm going to make up my mouth for fried eggs to-night, unless it's chicken on the half shell."

"No danger of that up here in the country; all the eggs are guaranteed fresh by the farmer tribe, you know," asserted Bluff.

"That guarantee doesn't always go with me," Jerry observed. "It's generally the smart farmer

who finds a hen trying to sit under the barn floor, and gathers up the seventeen eggs to ship with what he has in stock. They're as bad as the next one when it comes to deceiving the poor public."

"You'll just have to excuse me now, because I've had all I want; and to tell you the truth I'm just wild to see what my Br'er 'Coon looks like. If he doesn't show up, tail and all, I'll have to try for him again, that's all."

With that remark Will hurried off, just as Frank expected he would, for he had noticed how the other hastened with his breakfast. Bluff and Jerry took longer, because both of them realized they might be hours on the journey. The village was possibly further away than they thought; and it was just as well that they "laid in a good foundation to start with," as Jerry sensibly observed.

"Make the start whenever you get ready, fellows," remarked Frank. "I'll look after the dishes, and the bunks too, when the blankets are aired. It seems as if you might have a smooth sea to begin with."

"Yes, but you see we've been banking on some wind from the right quarter," observed Bluff, "in order to make good use of our sail. I'm fond of lying back at my ease in a boat, and letting

the breeze do all the work. There's nothing like it, eh, Jerry?"

"Oh, well, if you notice the way the clouds are moving slowly, and then watch the tiny ripple on the bay, you'll reckon that when the wind does come up it's going to favor us. We may even get too much of a good thing before we're done."

"Remember, fellows," Frank cautioned them, "that old boat isn't to be wholly depended on. I calked the seams the best way I could, but the wood's a bit rotten, and there's always danger that the oakum may work loose. Then the water would come in through the open seams in bucketfuls. So my advice to you is, keep fairly close to the shore all the time, even when cutting off coves."

"That is, you mean keep within swimming distance," added Jerry, "which we'll be sure to do, Frank, make your mind easy. A fellow that's fated to be hanged doesn't want to go and cheat things by being just simply drowned, you know."

"Hello! there's Will broken loose!" exclaimed Bluff.

"Just hear him whoop it up, will you?" added Jerry. "And here he comes on the run right now. He's holding a film he's developed, and from

the look on his face I'd say he must have gotten a corker that shot."

Indeed Frank could see that the approaching boy was very much excited; and it was also evident that what he was carrying so carefully before him had everything to do with his condition.

"Frank, here's something that will make you sit up and take notice!" he was calling out. "I started to take the picture of a boss 'coon, and see what I got, will you?"

Will held the still wet film up so they could have it between them and the light. All of the boys were accustomed to looking at negatives, and figuring out the high lights and the shadows in their proper proportion.

What they saw there plainly and clearly delineated on the film gave them such a sense of surprise that for several seconds none of them uttered a single word.

CHAPTER IX

THE FORAGING PARTY

"A 'coon on two legs, as sure as you're born, Will!" ejaculated Bluff presently.

"It's a man!" cried Jerry. "A man with a white beard in the bargain!"

"Frank, it's going to turn out a pretty fair picture, don't you think?" demanded the proud artist, thinking first of all of the success that had crowned his efforts.

"Seems like it, Will," replied the other; "but you've certainly given us a big surprise when you sprung this on the crowd. He must have run across the cord you had connected with the trigger of your flashlight apparatus, and it went off while he was in the act of falling forward."

"His face doesn't show as well as I'd like," continued Will, reflectively; "but even as it stands the chances are we'll find a look of astonishment there when I come to get a print."

"Well," remarked Bluff, "who wouldn't look staggered if, when he was walking along through

the woods, all of a sudden he caught his toe in a cord that was stretched across the path, and then had what seemed to be a flash of lightning strike him in the face?"

"I never happened to go through the experience," confessed Frank; "but I'm pretty sure it would give me a fierce jolt."

"But who can the sneaker be, Frank; some darky chicken thief prowling around in hopes of picking up some of our camp duffle?" asked Jerry.

Will turned on him with the scorn an expert photographer always displays when he meets crass ignorance.

"Why, can't you see from the dark shade of his face in the negative, Jerry, that he's a white man?" he demanded. "If it were a negro you'd see his face almost white here. That point is settled without any question."

"All right, Will, I acknowledge the corn," Jerry hastened to say; "but that doesn't bring us any nearer a solution of the mystery. Why should a white man, and one with a white beard at that, be wandering around our camp in the night?"

They looked at Frank. It was an old habit with the three chums. Whenever an unusually knotty point arose that needed attention, and

their powers seemed baffled, Frank was always depended on to supply the needed answer.

"So far as I'm concerned, fellows," he told them, "I can think of only one old man around this vicinity, and that happens to be Aaron Dennison."

"Ginger! why didn't I guess him right away?" grumbled Bluff. "Seems as if my wits go wool gathering nearly every time there's some sudden necessity for thinking up an answer. Course it's Aaron, and nobody else!"

"Yes," Jerry went on to say, as though not wholly convinced; "but what under the sun would Aaron be doing here, tell me, and acting suspiciously like a thief in the night?"

"Of course we can't say what tempted him to come out," Frank observed; "we've never met the gentleman face to face, but we have heard that he's a queer one. Besides, if you stop to think, you'll remember a little circumstance that seemed to connect old Aaron with this cabin on the Point many years ago."

"It takes you to piece out these things, Frank," admitted Bluff candidly. "Sure! We figured that out by finding a part of an old envelope in the deserted rat's nest under the floor board."

"Just as like as not," added Jerry, "the old chap owns all the ground along the lake shore,

including this cabin; and if that's so he'd have a perfect right to walk out this way whenever he chose, at midnight or noon, as the notion struck him."

"Oh, well," remarked Will with a sigh, "he spoiled my little game with Br'er 'Coon, though I mean to make another try along that line. When this film dries, which may be around noon, I'll strike off a proof, and then we can see what the old hermit looks like."

"One thing goes without saying," chuckled Bluff.

"What might that be?" Jerry asked him.

"Our night visitor didn't wait to find out what had blinded him on the trail, but must have turned and made lickety-split for home."

"Can you blame him?" demanded Will, demurely. "Stop and think how you'd feel if all of a sudden you got such a shock. Bluff, you said you were awake at the time, and heard some sort of a sound, didn't you?"

"Why yes, I'm dead certain I did; and now that we know it was a man who got the scare I reckon he gave a little screech. I thought it was a yelp from some wild animal at the time, but it could have been an exclamation just as well."

They continued to talk about the incident for some little time, but although several suggestions

were advanced, in the end they were really no closer to an explanation of the mystery than when they started.

All they knew was that some man, probably Aaron Dennison himself, had been walking along the old trail leading to the cabin from above when his foot caused the concealed trap to be sprung.

He must have turned hastily and retreated after the flash. What he thought the sudden dazzling illumination was caused by, the boys had no means of knowing.

Jerry and Bluff were now getting ready to start on their mission in search of supplies. They both expressed the hope that these could all be procured, once they reached the distant village on the lake shore, many miles off.

It promised to be an interesting trip, for they would pass along a shore neither of them had ever examined at close range before. To those who love outdoor life there is always a novelty about exploration. With new and interesting scenes opening up constantly before the eyes the senses are kept on the alert.

Bluff even had the temerity to suggest that Will loan them his camera for the occasion.

"We might run across some dandy pictures that would be worth while snapping off, you

know, Will," he went on to say in a wheedling tone of voice, which Bluff knew so well how to use.

Will, however, shook his head. Usually he was of a most accommodating nature; and on numerous occasions had willingly entrusted his highly valued camera into the keeping of the other boys, who knew how to use it almost as well as did the owner himself.

"I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you, Bluff," he remarked slowly.

"Oh! well, just as you say," declared the other, shrugging his broad shoulders as though it did not matter much after all, and as if taking care of the camera might possibly prove a task rather than a pleasure; "I reckon you're thinking about the chances of my dropping it overboard; or our running into a storm where the little old black box might get soaked and ruined."

"Not so much that, Bluff, as that I want to do some work on the camera," explained Will. "There's a little matter that really needs adjusting, and I told myself I'd fix it this morning sure. Then again I've laid out a scheme for today that if it works will call for the use of the camera."

"That's all right, Will," remarked the other, briskly; "it doesn't matter a pin to me, only I

thought you mightn't ever be going all the way to that village; and something fine could be run across between here and there."

He dropped the subject and began to talk with Frank about other things. Will looked a little uncomfortable. He disliked being thought selfish, and seemed almost on the point of changing his mind. Then on second thoughts he determined to carry out his original plan.

Frank looked over the old boat that had been patched up as well as the conditions allowed.

"It seems to hold pretty well," he told the two who expected to make use of it during the day. "Of course if the lake gets very rough so that you pitch about considerably, keep on the watch for a sudden inflow of water. The planks will hold, but I'm not so sure about the oakum I pounded into the open seams."

"But you did a good job, Frank," objected Jerry, "and so far none of it seems to have started to loosen."

"That's because we haven't had a chance to subject it to any big strain," Frank explained. "When a boat tosses up and down on the waves it gets a terrible wrench with each jerk. I've known seams to open at a time like that when they were believed to be closed as tight as a clam."

"Oh, well, we mean to follow your advice, Frank, and keep fairly close to the shore," Bluff promised.

"And if there is any trouble both of us are good swimmers, you remember," added Jerry confidently. "All I hope is that we get those precious eggs packed in a way that they won't be scrambled on the journey home. It'd be rough now if after all our hard work we had that happen. I prefer my eggs boiled or fried every time."

None of the four chums as they joked in this fashion dreamed of what Fate had in store for them before the sun went down behind the western horizon. How could they suspect when just then the heavens looked so fair and inviting?

"What's that you've got there with you, Jerry?" asked Bluff, who had been fixing a phantom minnow on a troll, in the expectation of picking up a fish or two while they rowed.

"Oh! a little cold snack in the shape of grub," explained the other, who on all occasions possessed a voracious appetite.

"But don't you remember we planned to be in the village long before noon, and expected to get dinner there?" protested Bluff.

"All right, that strikes me as a good scheme,"

came the ready reply; "but with my customary caution I'm only insuring against starvation. How do we know but what we'll be shipwrecked half-way there, and find ourselves up against it? For one I don't propose to go hungry when there's a chance to save myself."

Bluff laughed on hearing this explanation.

"Trust you to look out for that, Jerry!" he declared. "And I suppose that in case we do get dinner at the village tavern or a farmhouse, you'll be ready to make way with your snack on the voyage back?"

"I might be influenced by strong pressure," chuckled the other.

"How about the weather, Frank; see any sign of a storm in the offing?" asked Bluff, turning to the leader of the camp.

"Nothing in sight right now," he was told; "the chances are you'll have clear weather going, though there may be some wind behind you. What's going to happen in the afternoon is another matter. I'm not a weather sharp, and so I throw up my hands when you ask me to lift the veil."

All being ready, the boys launched their boat. Bluff was to use the oars for the first shift. When he began to tire he was to call on his chum to change places, unless in the meantime

the breeze had freshened enough for them to make use of their sail.

"Good-bye, fellows!" called out Will; "see you later, and take mighty good care of those eggs, remember!"

"Listen to him, would you?" jeered Jerry. "So long as the hen fruit gets here unbroken Will doesn't seem to care what happens to his chums. But that's all right, and we hope to turn up safe and sound before sunset." And under the steady influence of the oars the boat glided on until the voices of the boys died away in the distance.

CHAPTER X

TRESPASSERS

THE two guardians of the camp at Cabin Point, being left to their own devices, set about carrying out certain tasks they had in mind.

Frank always found plenty to occupy his attention. He could discover numerous ways of bettering the conditions of affairs, and took keen delight in making changes calculated to lessen the friction of camp life.

On his part Will pottered with his camera for fully an hour. When in the end he laid it aside in working order he was satisfied with what he had done.

"I've got it in splendid condition now, Frank," he announced, "and from this time on there'll be no danger of a slip when the trap is sprung. That's been bothering me a whole lot for some time now, and I'm tickled to know the ghost is laid."

Every little while he examined the negative he had drying, as though anxious to get a proof from it when it was in proper condition.

About eleven o'clock he came to Frank holding a browned bit of paper on which the sun had printed a very clear picture as taken when the flashlight cartridge burned.

"The face shows fairly well," he announced. "I'd easily enough recognize the man if ever I ran across him, and that's something."

Frank looked long and earnestly at the proof.

"So that's our hermit, is it?" he remarked; "the old man they say acts so queerly, and has kept to himself up there on his estate for years, living the life of a recluse among his books and papers. There must be some good reason for his acting that way. He's met with some sort of terrible disappointment in life it may be; but then that's no business of ours."

"But Frank, I was meaning to suggest something to you to-day," began Will, looking uncertain, as though he did not know just how the other might take the proposition he had on the tip of his tongue.

"Oh! so that's the way the wind blows, does it?" remarked Frank, raisng his eyebrows as he looked at his chum. "Somehow when you declined to let Bluff take the camera along with him I had an idea you were figuring on some scheme. You look like a regular conspirator, Will. Out with it before you choke."

"Listen then, Frank; I was hoping I might coax you to go up there again to-day when I could be along."

Frank whistled upon hearing this suggestion.

"I reckon you mean go to the hermit's place, Will?" he remarked inquiringly.

"Yes, that's just it, Frank, and please, now, don't shut down on me too quickly. Say you'll think it over, and let me know at noon."

Frank scratched his head as though considering. The fact of the matter was he himself had a peculiar yearning to make that trip again. There is a sort of subtle fascination about prowling around forbidden territory. Then the mystery connected with the hermit had aroused his curiosity. That strange cry, too, lingered in his memory even more than Frank cared to confess to Bluff.

"But what excuse can we give for trespassing if we run across old Aaron, his housekeeper, or any man connected with the place?" he asked Will.

At that the other smiled calmly.

"Well, you know an amateur photographer never wants for a reason when he gets caught intruding on private grounds," he explained; "his enthusiasm is supposed to tempt him to take any risks. And Frank, if we run across any

trouble don't hesitate to pile all the blame on me. I'm willing to stand for it."

"Is it the house you're aimng to take a picture of, Will?"

"Partly that," the other confessed. "You and Bluff described it as a strange looking building, and worth seeing, so I'm fairly wild to snap it off. And then, if we just happened to come on Aaron himself, why I might manage to get him in focus and click my camera without his knowing it. I hope you'll go this time, Frank. Somehow I've got my heart set on it."

"Well, perhaps I may, Will. Let the thing drop till we're eating our lunch, and then I'll tell you what I'll do."

"Good for you, Frank!" exclaimed Will, beaming on his chum, for somehow he must have guessed that the chances of their going were pretty fair.

When noon arrived and they sat down to enjoy what had been prepared Will's face looked so much like one big interrogation point that Frank did not have the heart to keep him longer in suspense.

"I see no good reason why we shouldn't wander up that way if we feel like it," he went on to say, at which the other looked greatly pleased. "Of course," Frank continued, "it isn't exactly

the right thing for us to crawl through that opening in the fence again, especially after we've been warned off by the housekeeper; but since you say you *must* get a snapshot of the house, why, we'll risk it."

"That's kind of you to agree, Frank."

"Oh! I rather guess it's six for you and half a dozen for myself," chuckled the other lad; "because I own up there's something about Aaron's place up there that draws me more than I ought to allow. But after all we mean no harm, and besides we may not meet any one on our trip."

"Remember," added Will, with a grin, "it's only returning the old gentleman's visit of last night, you know. We want to be neighborly, of course."

There was no hurry, since they had the whole afternoon ahead of them. Will, however, urged a start because he had hopes that they might return by a long, roundabout course, and possibly pick up some interesting views on the way.

"There are some clouds passing overhead," remarked Frank, "and we may get a little thunder shower while away; so we'd better fix things here shipshape."

This was easily done, though of course they did not think to fasten the door in any way. The

other two boys might get back before they did, and it would be foolish to bar them out of the cabin. Besides, what reason had they to fear any invasion from tramps up in this lonely section of country?

Once started, Will seemed very happy. Frank on his part had no great difficulty in following the dimly seen trail. From time to time he would show his companion the marks of footprints both going and coming, and which were other than those left by himself and Bluff on the preceding day.

"That proves we guessed right when we said it was old Aaron who ran against the string of your flashlight trap," Frank explained; "and I'd give a cooky to know why he was making for the cabin at the time."

"You told the housekeeper, didn't you, Frank, that we had bunked in the cabin on the point jutting out into the bay?"

"Yes, and she may have informed him," Frank mused. "Even if he's kept himself up here away from everybody for so long, buried in his books, old Aaron might have enough curiosity to walk down over this trail that he knows so well, just to take a look at us."

"If he's half as gruff as they say," suggested Will, "he may have meant to order us to vacate

the ranch. Then that awful flash came and frightened it all out of him."

Other things cropping up caused them to change the subject. And in due course of time they sighted the high board fence with which the strange hermit had surrounded his estate, thus warning strollers to keep out.

Will was interested in everything connected with the isolated home of the rich and mysterious recluse.

"Of course," he remarked, reflectively, "we could climb over that fence if we went to a lot of trouble, even if it has got a barbed wire strand along the top; but it would take more or less time. And you said there was an opening we could use, didn't you, Frank?"

"It's just ahead a little way, if some one hasn't found the loose board and fastened it up securely," replied the pilot of the expedition.

They were pleased to discover that this had not happened. The loose board still hung in position, and could be easily moved to one side, allowing them a ready entry to the enclosed grounds.

Neither of them spoke above a whisper as they advanced. Frank followed the tracks he and Bluff had made when leaving, since these marked the shortest route to the building. And

it was not long before they caught their first glimpse of the house.

The sun happened to be just about right for a good picture of the front; Will hoped those drifting clouds would not come along in an exasperating way, as so often happens in the experience of every amateur photographer, and obscure the light.

"It's going to make a cracker-jack of a picture, Frank!" said Will, eagerly, and in the lowest of tones, as though he feared that something might still happen to keep him from accomplishing his cherished purpose.

"Just what I thought," replied the other, in an equally cautious voice; "which was one reason I agreed to bring you up here. Get busy now, Will."

The boy with the camera glanced about him, looking for the proper spot from which to snap off his picture. Taking into consideration the situation of the sun at that particular minute, together with the direction the long, low building faced, Will saw that he could get in the entire front and the western side.

He moved a little to the left and gauged matters with his practiced eye. Being quite a skillful operator with the lens and the shutter, Will could judge these things much better than any of his

chums. In a case of this kind at least he had no occasion to ask the advice of Frank.

The latter in the meanwhile was looking from window to window of the two-story building. It must have many rooms, he judged, from the number of these openings. He was also wondering whether that old and vigilant housekeeper would chance to discover the intruders in front of the house, and hasten out to warn them away, lest they get in trouble with her master.

Then, too, Frank was letting his curiosity have free rein again; he remembered the weird cry that had come floating to the ears of himself and Bluff, giving them such a queer feeling.

Nothing happened to spoil Will's chance of getting a good picture. The clouds kept away from the sun in the most accommodating way, and no gruff keeper of the grounds came along with an angry demand that he desist in his undertaking, as the owner of the estate did not wish the public to see what manner of home he had built for himself there behind that towering fence.

When Frank heard a slight "click" he knew that Will had made at least one exposure, though like a cautious photographer he might decide to shift his location a trifle and try again, so as to make sure of his work.

Their excursion, then, promised to meet with success. If only the eccentric owner of the place himself should come along and give Will a chance to snap his picture off it would be doubly satisfactory.

That was what Frank was saying to himself as he stood and waited for Will to complete his work. Once he fancied he heard some slight sound, like the rustling of bushes, and wondered whether, after all, there could be a dog at large within the enclosed grounds.

Frank realized that they were intruders, and as such could not give any good excuse for being there. He decided that they had better linger no longer; and was really in the act of turning to wave his hand to Will, some twenty feet or more away, when something happened that stopped his plan.

A voice that was trembling with anger came to his ears, and gave him a rude shock.

"How dare you trespass on this private property, and even have the assurance to take a picture of my house, you young rascals?" was what this furious voice said, and turning quickly Frank saw the speaker not five feet away from him.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE BIG TIMBER

Of course it was Mr. Dennison himself. Frank could easily have guessed as much from the manner in which the other behaved, even had he not spoken of the building as "my house."

The first thing Frank settled in his mind was that their visitor of the preceding night had been Aaron Dennison. The white, close-cropped beard told him that. Then he saw that the old gentleman held a stout cane in his hand, which he had half raised as though sorely tempted to make strenuous use of it upon the backs of these two ambitious amateur photographers.

Frank knew how to talk, and use soothing language. His chums always said he would make a good lawyer. Apparently he might go a long time before running across a better opportunity for smoothing the "ruffled feathers" of an angry man than was now offered to him.

"I hope you'll excuse us, Mr. Dennison, for entering your grounds to take a picture of your

house," he started to say. "We didn't mean any harm, and will go away at once, sir."

The man looked sternly at Frank, but the boy noticed with a feeling of relief that the half upraised stick was slowly lowered. Apparently something influenced Aaron Dennison to decide not to take the law into his own hands, and use that heavy cane on these rash intruders.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded abruptly.

"There is a board loose on the fence, sir, and we couldn't resist the temptation to come through. My chum here is making a hobby of taking pictures, and he wanted one of your house, because it was so peculiar in its build. I hope you won't think too badly of us for intruding."

Aaron Dennison did not take any notice of this last remark; but apparently he caught some meaning back of Frank's words.

"How did you know my house differed from any other one; have you been in here before this?"

Evidently the discreet old housekeeper had decided not to tell of the former visit of the boys, and it was Frank himself who had given the secret away. He determined not to evade the issue, but continue to be frank with the irate gentleman.

"Yes, sir," he said, steadily. "I wandered up this way yesterday, and saw the house. It was because I was so enthusiastic in my description that Will here wanted to come and get a picture of it."

"So as to tell every one, I suppose, that it is the secluded home of the eccentric old hermit, as I believe they call me in the towns where my men trade," the other continued with a half sneer. "But what are you boys doing up in this section of the country? It is the first time for a long while that I have seen a stranger about here."

"We are camping, sir, on the lake shore, and having a good time for a few weeks, fishing, taking pictures, and all that. In our home town of Centerville they call us the Outdoor Chums, because we love to camp out."

"On the lake shore, you say?" repeated the other, looking keenly at Frank. "Tell me, is your camp anywhere near Cabin Point?"

"Yes, we've gone to work, Mr. Dennison, and fixed the old cabin all up; and it's there we're staying," Frank told him.

"I wonder—" began the other, frowning, "if you had anything to do with startling me last night, when I was taking a walk down to the lake, as I sometimes do when the spirit moves me. Do you know anything about that frightful

blinding flash that gave me such a shock I had to hurry home?"

"I am afraid we are to blame for that, sir, though I give you my word of honor we had no idea any human being would spring the trap. You see, my chum here is devoted to getting flashlight pictures of wild animals and birds in their native haunts. To do that he has to place his camera at night, and with a bait coax the little creature to set the trap off. And it happened, sir, that you ran across the cord connected with the trigger of the flashlight gun."

"Is this the truth you are telling me, boy?" demanded the puzzled hermit.

"Will, do you happen to have that proof with you?" called out Frank. Upon hearing this, the other hastened up, though there was a satisfied smirk on his face, as though he had accomplished something daring.

As Frank believed he had heard a soft click just before this, he could give a pretty good guess as to what the other had been up to.

Upon the proof being produced Frank stepped forward and held it out to the old gentleman, who took it eagerly. He even smiled faintly as he saw himself in the act of falling, and with all the elements of sudden surprise and alarm connected with his action.

"At least this satisfies me that you had no intention of giving me such a bad fright. I can forgive you in part, because I, too, am interested in photography, which is indeed my only recreation nowadays besides reading. But you must not come here again. I do not allow intruders, and if you had chanced to be seen by one of my men the consequences might have been unpleasant for you."

"Then we will go away at once, sir," said Frank; "though we'll always be glad we met you, Mr. Dennison."

The recluse frowned again as though he remembered that he had a reason for not wishing to hold intercourse with others. And seeing he did not mean to continue the conversation any further Frank nodded to Will, after which they walked away.

When they looked back a minute later Mr. Dennison was still standing there as though in a deep study. Somehow he interested Frank very much indeed, for the boy realized that there must be some very good reason for his shunning his kind.

They had almost reached the hole in the fence, when, just as had happened on the preceding day, there came that strange cry. Will thought it might be the screech of a peacock, though he

could not remember having seen such a fowl strutting about the lawn.

"It may be what you say," admitted Frank, "but when you hear a queer sound under such conditions as these it seems different from anything you ever ran up against. Bluff thought it was a dog chained up; you say a peacock; and for my part I hardly know what to believe."

"Anyhow, Frank, I got him all right," chuckled Will.

"Meaning the old hermit, of course," said the other. "I thought I heard your shutter click. It will be worth something to say you took his picture as well as that you got one of his peculiarly built house, which I reckon few people have ever so much as seen."

"But after all's said and done, Frank, old Aaron isn't just the kind of man I always thought a real hermit must be. Why, he's a gentleman, and not a bit careless of his appearance, the way most of them are described to be. He dotes on books, they say. And oh, Frank! did you hear him admit he was fond of dabbling in amateur photography himself?"

"Yes, that was what he said, Will."

"I wish I could make a good impression on old Aaron, then, because like as not he'd have some dandy pictures to show. He's got rafts of

money, you know, and must have traveled a heap in his time."

Frank laughed at hearing this.

"Now I wouldn't be surprised," he remarked, "if you tried to get thick with our hermit before we shut up shop at Cabin Point!"

"I own I'd like to, though I don't think I'll have much of a chance, Frank, because you see he's shut down on us, and forbidden us to ever look in on him after this. Now what do you reckon ails the man, and why should he act in that way? He must have just soured on the world for some reason or other."

They passed outside, and allowed the loose board to fall back into its place again. Unless one were looking for a break in the fence it would be possible to pass by without noticing anything wrong there.

"But now since he knows some of us were in his grounds twice," lamented Will, "old Aaron may give his men orders to search all around till they find the break. If they had any sense at all they could follow our tracks and come to it. But, Frank, how about taking a swing around on the way home?"

"You spoke of that before, Will, and as we have plenty of time I don't know any reason we shouldn't make something of a circuit. I'm as

curious as you can be to see something of the country."

"Likely none of us will ever be up this way again," remarked Will, "and so we'd better make the most of our opportunities. Besides, there's no telling what cracker-jack chances we may strike for pictures. I'm always on the lookout for anything like that, you remember."

Frank of course knew next to nothing about the lay of the ground, but he could give a pretty good guess, for he had kept his eyes about him all of the time. Accordingly he laid out the course they would take.

"Unless we strike something tougher than we figure on," he explained to Will, "we ought to make the round and be back in camp long before sundown."

"What if the other fellows do arrive before us," remarked the photographer of the expedition, "they can start in to get supper if they're half starving. I just feel like making hay while the sun shines. This seems to be one of my lucky days, because I've already snapped off some pictures that ought to be worth while. When we start to talking about hermits and such things we'll have something to show for it."

Starting off, they were speedily in the heart of what seemed to be a dense wood. Will ex-

pressed himself as well pleased with the surroundings, and soon discovered some remarkable sights that called for the use of his camera.

They pushed on for more than an hour, and by that time had covered considerable distance. When Frank hinted that perhaps they had better turn back Will begged him not to give up just then.

"You see we've still plenty of time to make the cabin long before dark," he urged, "and I'm sure we'll find it worth our while to keep on the way we're going. It seems to me the country keeps getting rougher the further we push ahead. Already I'm just tickled to death with what I've seen."

"It's a fact that we've run across as wild a section as I've ever met with," admitted Frank. "I never would have believed there could be such a primitive stretch of land within a hundred miles of Centerville. Right now you can look around in every direction, and there isn't a sign to show that you're not out at the foot of the Rockies, just as we found it at the time we had our big hunt."

"At that time, you know, Frank, I hadn't caught on to this wild animal photography business. What wonderful pictures I could have taken then if only I'd known the racket. It keeps growing on me all the while, too. Right now

I expect I get more of a thrill when I'm snapping off the picture of a bull moose bellowing his defiance to the guide's call, than you would with your rifle at your shoulder ready for a shot."

"I reckon you do, Will, for I can understand what you feel. I really believe that if you hadn't gone in for the game I'd have picked it up myself. But one photographic crank in the party is enough; some of us have to stick to the gun in order to supply the meat for the camp when the season is on."

Frank had been persuaded by Will's logic, and he continued to push on, though constantly keeping track of conditions. He did not wish to have to confess sooner or later that he was lost, which would not be so impossible a thing to happen in that dense wood.

It was while they were making their way along in this fashion toward the middle of the afternoon, that, without the slightest warning, there came a loud and angry crash of thunder; and looking up in a startled way they saw inky black clouds gathering overhead.

CHAPTER XII

CAUGHT IN THE STORM

"Why Frank! what does this mean?" exclaimed the astonished Will, as he stared first at his chum, and then up past the lofty tops of the forest trees to where those inky thunder-caps were thrusting their ugly noses into sight.

"Simply that we've been caught napping for once," replied the other, with an expression of mingled amusement and disgust on his face; for such a thing did not happen very often in the experience of a wideawake fellow like Frank Langdon.

"It's going to storm like fun," continued Will, with growing apprehension.

"And the first thing we've got to do," his companion told him, "is to look for shelter. Under these big trees we might find a place to keep dry, for there's one that's hollow right now; but the danger of its being struck by lightning is too great for me to risk."

"Whew! we're in for it, I expect!" cried Will,

who apparently had received quite a severe shock upon making this sudden discovery, when up to the time that loud thunder clap startled them neither of the boys had suspected anything.

Frank began to look hastily about him. He knew what he wanted to find above all things, and fortunately the country around that section was capable of producing such a safe shelter.

"Hurry along this way, Will!" he called out. "If I remember rightly I noticed some outcropping ledges back a little bit. We may be lucky enough to find shelter under a shelf of rock."

"That's a good idea, Frank," admitted Will, as he tried to keep close on the heels of his hurrying comrade.

"If the rain will only hold off ten minutes, even less, we ought to get to that rocky section, unless I miss my guess," Frank threw back over his shoulder.

They pushed on with all their vim. Meanwhile it grew very dark and forbidding. Will could not remember ever to have seen the day swallowed up in the gathering shades of night so quickly before. It appalled the boy, for he did not possess the same unconquerable nature as Frank.

One crash of thunder followed another in rapid succession. The very earth under their

FLASHES OF LIGHTNING FAIRLY BLINDED THE CHUMS.

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flying feet seemed to quiver with the concussions. Lightning shot downward with such vivid flashes that it fairly blinded them; so that Will's soul was filled with awe.

"Frank, oh, Frank!" cried the boy in the rear.

"All right, Will, what is it?" replied the other, who kept glancing back at very brief intervals to make sure his chum still ran at his heels, for he feared that should they ever be separated in that gathering gloom it would be impossible for them to come together again.

"Do you think we can make it?" demanded the other, with a touch of despair in his voice, for the situation looked frightfully appalling to Will.

"Sure we will!" he was immediately assured in Frank's most cheery fashion. "Right now I can see the first of the rocks. Given two more minutes at the most and we'll be able to crawl under a shelf, and lie there as snug as two bugs in a rug."

Frank did not feel any too sanguine himself, but he would not let Will know of any fears he possessed regarding the possibility of their not finding the shelter among the rocks after all.

A terrific peal of thunder drowned their conversation for a brief interval, but they were pushing resolutely forward all the while. Frank was straining those keen eyes of his to some

purpose. He knew they were at the border of the rough, rocky section now. If only they could run upon the friendly outcropping shelf which he remembered to have seen at the time they passed before, they would find shelter.

All would have been easy enough had they been given ordinary daylight so as to look around them. The gathering gloom made it very difficult to see twenty feet away with any degree of certainty. Frank was being guided partly by instinct, and the knowledge that he had taken his right bearings to start with.

"Frank, I felt the first drop of rain!" shrilled Will, filled with a new fear, for he was afraid that his pet camera would be ruined should they be soaked to the skin, which was a calamity terrible enough to break his heart.

Frank did not need to be told of the falling rain, for he, too, had discovered the ominous fact even before his chum announced it. There was nothing to be done but set their teeth grimly and bear it. The rocks were now all around them. If only they could discover that friendly ledge!

"Yes, it's beginning to come down now, because I can hear it in the tree-tops over that way, can't you, Frank?"

"What you hear is mostly the wind, Will; but that sounds bad enough, I own up. There, I

remember that broken tree making a bow above the path we followed. And the ledges were close by it, I'm dead certain. Come this way, Will; chances are we'll run on them right off."

This cheery talk buoyed up the despondent spirits of the other, and he set his teeth grimly, determined to hold out to the end. Another flash that almost blinded them, quickly followed by a resounding bellow of thunder, announced that the downpour of rain must be very close indeed; doubtless it would descend upon them with that furious gale of wind.

"Hurrah! here they are, Will! Brace up, old fellow, for it's going to be all right!"

So dense had the darkness become that Frank found himself relying almost wholly on the electric flashes for his illumination. The last brilliant charge had disclosed the fact of the near presence of the ledges which he had kept in mind so long.

Fortune favored them in that Frank was able to discover the largest ledge close at hand. It stood out far enough to allow of their crawling well underneath, where the rain, no matter how it was driven by the furious wind, could not reach them.

Even as the two fugitives dropped down on their hands and knees, and started to creep under

the flat rocks, the rain began to fall heavily. In fact it seemed to Will that hardly had his feet been drawn under the accommodating shelter than the heavens opened, and the floods descended.

The two boys pushed well in and made themselves as comfortable as their condition allowed. This of course was not saying much, for they were sitting on hard rock, with their heads touching the shelf that hung above.

It was utterly impossible for them to exchange a single word just then, owing to the riot of sound that came from beyond. The thunder bellowed, the wind roared, trees could be heard at intervals crashing to the ground, and the rain beat a terrible tattoo on the rock that sheltered them.

So fast did the lightning play that they were glad to close their eyes lest in staring into that dazzling glare they should find themselves blinded.

Will managed to push up close to his chum. Somehow it seemed to give him more confidence just to feel the contact. Thus he knew he was not alone in the midst of that hurricane, really the worst he had ever experienced in all his life.

The time wore on. Once the dreadful storm seemed to have passed, and it even grew consid-

erably lighter. Will plucked up fresh hope, believing the end had come, and that they could soon be on their way to camp, to reach there at dusk perhaps.

Frank, however, began to see things in a different light. He noted that there were signs telling of a return of the gale. The second spell might be as bad as the first; and if it kept them confined there under the rocks until night came on it would be utterly out of the question to think of setting forth.

So Frank, foreseeing fresh trouble ahead, braced himself to meet it. They would have to make a virtue of necessity, and stay there all night. That was not a pleasant outlook, but then things might be a lot worse, Frank told himself.

Sure enough the gloom once more descended, and again the thunder took up the old rumble and crash. Perhaps the wind was not as furious as was the first rush, and the rain may have been less in quantity, but the second part of the storm was severe and terrifying enough.

"If it wasn't that we've had an even worse spell," Will managed to call out, "I'd think this was the worst ever. Frank, what's the answer to all this? How are we going to get back to camp?"

"Walk, of course," replied the other; "it's the only way."

"But even now the afternoon must be pretty well gone," objected Will.

"It certainly is," he was told.

"We don't know the exact way to camp," continued Will, "the night is coming on in a hurry, the trees are dripping with water, and in lots of places they have been thrown down every-which-way by that hurricane. We never can make camp to-night, that's sure!"

"I'm glad you understand that, Will, because I was just going to break it to you. No, it would be foolish for us to try such a thing. We've been pretty lucky as it is to escape getting wet jackets. We'll have to put in a long night here the best we can."

"Whew! it will be a terribly long one, too," declared Will, listening to the retreating growl of the thunder. "And the worst of it is the weather usually turns cold after one of these storms. We'll get to shivering to beat the band. I wish we could make a fire some way or other."

"I'm afraid that's going to be out of the question," Frank told him. "Of course we have matches in plenty, but we couldn't get dry wood after that deluge. You see we had no chance to look around us for a dead tree, and we have no

camp hatchet along with us to do any chopping."

"Oh, well, I guess we can stand it, Frank. Morning is bound to get here sooner or later. We've gone through as bad times as this more than once, haven't we?"

"I should say we had," Frank immediately replied, anxious to buoy up the spirits of his companion as much as possible. "And for one thing, that wind isn't going to reach in under here to any extent."

"You're right about that," admitted Will; "it comes from back of the ledge, now that it's shifted into the west. Surely we have lots to be thankful for. But of course we'll feel pretty hungry, because neither of us is used to going without supper, you see."

At that Frank laughed.

"I thought I'd do it for a joke, first of all," he remarked; "you see I'd been reading about the way the Indians make their pemmican by drying venison, and how they carry a handful in their pouches when they have a day's journey afoot to make, munching on it once in a while."

"But what has that to do with us, Frank; we have no pemmican in camp, have we?"

"No, but that piece of dried beef made me think of it, and for fun I carved off a small hunk, intending to spring it on you as a joke if

you happened to say you felt hungry. I've got it here in the pocket of my coat."

"Well! of all the luck, that takes the cake!" exclaimed Will. "We can grind our teeth on that once in a while, and make believe we're enjoying the most magnificent camp dinner going, eh, Frank?"

"It's apt to make us thirsty, of course, but just now it happens that pools of water can be found for the looking, so that needn't bother us any. So we're fixed in the line of grub; and there's no danger of starving to death yet awhile."

By the time the last of the storm died away in the distance it was almost night; in fact Will discovered the first star peeping through a rent in the clouds overhead. Therefore the two chums started to make themselves as comfortable as the hard conditions of their shelter allowed, thankful that they had been spared being caught in the open by that fearful summer storm.

CHAPTER XIII

TAKING A BEE-LINE FOR CAMP

FRANK and Will were not apt soon to forget that night. They were compelled to remain under the shelf of rock, because outside everything was soaking wet; and besides, the night wind blew unusually cold for that time of year. Without a fire to cheer them it would have been unbearable to try to stay in the open.

Of course the rocks proved very hard. Every little while the boys would change their positions in the endeavor to relieve their aching limbs. Many times did Will find himself sighing for his blanket, which had never seemed half so precious as now, when it was far away.

Frank managed to divide the piece of hard dried beef with his knife, and give the larger portion to Will, who, of course, knew nothing of the sacrifice. They munched away from time to time, taking minute bites, and grinding the tough meat between their teeth as long as possible before swallowing it.

This served in some measure to keep their thoughts away from their unhappy condition, which was one object Frank had in mind.

At times they talked of the two comrades who had gone off, aboard the boat, bent on reaching the far distant village on the lake shore. Will worried about them. Frank professed to have the utmost confidence in the ability of the chums to look after themselves.

"Stop and figure it all out, Will," he told the other. "If they made as good time as we expected, they must have reached the village long before noon came. In fact, we felt pretty sure they were in port at the time we ate our own lunch in camp."

"Yes, that's what we agreed," admitted the other, briskly.

"Well, let's try to guess what they'd be apt to do," continued Frank.

"I know what Jerry would have in his mind first of all, if it happened to be anywhere around noon," said Will. "Jerry never forgets when it's meal time; and the chances are ten to one he'd try to make sure they were going to get dinner somewhere."

"All right," agreed Frank; "that might bring them to nearly one o'clock. Afterward they'd want to get a hustle on them trying to gather up

a supply of butter and fresh eggs, according to their orders. Now if they had to go outside the place to get the supplies it would be long after two before they'd be in shape even to think of starting back to camp."

"I see what you're hitting at, Frank; you mean they'd likely enough notice how the inky black clouds were moving up in the sky about that time, because being so close to the big lake they could see all this; while the woods hid it from us."

"Just so," Frank continued, his one desire being to convince the anxious chum that Bluff and Jerry could be in no real peril. "And the people of the village, you see, would urge them to hold over, telling them it was too risky to try to row an old leaky boat all those miles with such a storm coming up."

"Then you believe they are still there in the village, do you, Frank?"

"I really and truly do," came the steady answer; "and, even at the worst, if the boys were foolish enough to make the start you can depend on it they'd hurry to get ashore long before the storm broke."

"Well," concluded Will, "nothing could have tempted me to stay out on the lake a minute, once that thunder started to crash, and I knew the

wind must soon come tearing along. I guess Jerry wouldn't take too many chances, even if Bluff wanted to keep rowing on."

"Another thing you've got reason to be satisfied about is your camera," suggested Frank, knowing what store his comrade set by his treasured instrument.

"Yes, for it hasn't been wet even a little bit!" Will declared. "I've always been pretty lucky that way. In fact the only streak of misfortune that ever struck me was the loss of those Maine films. I even dream about them, Frank; and I certainly do hope that Gilbert brings them back, if he comes this way."

"He may turn up any time now," Frank assured him. "The golf tournament must have been played before this, and if Gilbert lives around this part of the country you'll see him coming after those golf balls of his. They look extra fine to me."

"And my films would be worth next door to nothing to him; just as I look on his silly old golf balls. Queer how one man's food is another man's poison, isn't it?"

A dozen times Frank had to scratch a match at the request of his mate in order to take a glance at his watch. The time seemed actually to drag along.

"I've read about the minutes passing on leaden wings," said Will, with a long-drawn sigh, "but now I know just what that means. Eleven o'clock you said, didn't you, Frank? That means six more to bring us to five in the morning; and I suppose we couldn't think of making a start any earlier than that."

"As soon as it's broad daylight we'll get a move on us," promised the other. "We only want to make sure we can see how to avoid pitfalls and fallen trees."

"How far are we from camp, do you reckon, Frank?"

Will asked this last question rather drowsily; for in spite of his pains he was beginning to get sleepy.

"Only a few miles as the crow flies," he was assured.

"Of course you've got the direction down all —er, what you call it, pat, I suppose?"

Frank told him he felt sure he could take a bee-line for camp; and a minute afterwards, there being no further questions, only the regular breathing of a tired lad, he knew that Will had dropped off.

Neither of them managed to secure any great amount of sleep. Their hard resting-place prevented such a thing. After a nap of possibly

half an hour Frank would awaken to find one of his legs numb under him, while his muscles fairly ached with the severe strain to which they were quite unaccustomed.

Twice both boys felt so numb with the cold that acting on Frank's advice they crawled out from under the sheltering rock, and for a short time went through with exercises devised to send the blood leaping through their veins.

It was by all odds the longest night either of the lads had ever experienced, in so far as their feelings were concerned. Twice the eager and impatient Will gave a false alarm, under the impression that he had glimpsed the dawn stealing in upon them. The first time Frank showed him by his watch how impossible this was, for it had hardly reached two o'clock.

But all things must come to an end, bad as well as good; and finally Frank himself detected the coming of dawn. It was not by sight that he knew this but through the twittering of birds in neighboring trees, where the poor things had hidden to escape the terrible storm.

"I guess that's meant for a tune of thanksgiving and praise on account of having escaped death in all that wind and rain," Frank told himself as he listened to the faint songs taking form around him.

He did not awaken his chum, because there was no need. They could not start at once, and the boy needed what sleep he could get after such a wretched night.

It was broad day when Will awoke.

"Why! what's this, Frank?" he exclaimed, reproachfully, "how could you let me waste time sleeping when we might have been on our way?"

"Oh! no hurry," he was told; "and you seemed to be getting forty winks after such a tough night. But now that you've waked up, let's crawl out of here."

Neither of them felt any sorrow at leaving their hard beds, though that did not mean they could ever be anything but grateful for the welcome shelter of that nook under the rocky shelf.

Frank had no hesitancy about pointing toward the quarter where he believed the camp must lie.

"We'll take our bearings, Will, and then head straight. In the course of two hours at the most we ought to strike the lake, and close to Cabin Point in the bargain."

"Before we leave here," remarked Will, the old instinct still gripping him, "I'd like to get a snapshot of that bully ledge, now that the sun is peeping up, and shines full on the place."

"A good idea," Frank told him; "we'll often

smile when we look at it, and remember our rough experience. I think every time I happen to munch a bit of jerked or dried beef my thoughts will go back to this adventure."

"Yes," added the other, with a chuckle, "and with me, every time anybody mentions dried beef you'll see me begin to rub my poor bones where they ache right now as if my joints were so many boils."

They had not gone far before they began to notice many signs that told of the fury of the wind during the storm. Trees had been toppled completely over or else lay up against some neighboring trunk in a helpless condition, "much like drunken men," Will declared.

Will discovered a number of remarkable sights that appealed to his artistic instinct, so that Frank had to wait until he had focussed his camera and then pressed the button. Those pictures would always remind them of their lively experiences when on the way back to camp after the second visit to Aaron Dennison's place.

When about an hour had passed Will began to show signs of fresh anxiety, but he was confidently assured by his chum that everything was all right.

"The lake is straight ahead of us, you can depend on that," was what the pilot told him; "and

pretty soon I think I can prove it to you, since seeing is believing."

"How is that?" asked Will, his curiosity aroused at once, as Frank intended it should be.

"We're coming to a little hill," was the explanation, "and unless the trees are too dense to hide our view I figure we ought to see the big water from the crown; anyway we'll take the trouble to climb up and find out."

Frank was right, for upon arriving at the top of the elevation they managed to find one avenue among the treetops through which they could glimpse the glistening waters of the sun-kissed lake.

After that Will complained no longer, having the utmost confidence in the ability of his companion to guide the expedition into a safe harbor.

Before the second hour had fully elapsed they realized that the shore was close by. Will declared he could even hear the lapping of the waves on the pebbly strand.

"We might have made it in much less time, you understand," said Frank, "if it had not been for the fallen trees we had to go around; and then there was the ravine we skirted a long way before meeting with a place where we could cross."

"But it's all right in the end, Frank; and let me tell you I'm thankful we came through the business as well as we did. Now the only thing to bother us is the fate of the other fellows."

"Oh! they're all right, you can depend on it," said Frank.

"But I don't hear any chopping or talking, and we must be close enough to the cabin to get that, you know," speculated Will.

"Which proves my theory was sound, and that they had to stay all night in the village. You can depend on it, Will, they fared better than we did, because the chances are they slept on feather beds, and had all they wanted to eat."

"Oh, good, now we can cook something! I'm about as near empty as I want to be, and feel able to make way with the biggest beefsteak going. There, I can see the cabin, Frank! I'm glad to find out the storm didn't pick it up bodily and carry it into the lake, as I sometimes thought it might have done."

Both of them hurried their steps a little, for the thought of a warm and tasty breakfast certainly appealed to them as seldom before. Consequently they soon reached the cabin on the Point, which they now called their camp home.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RETURN OF THE VOYAGERS

"After all the old cabin has had a pretty narrow escape, Will."

Frank, as he said this, pointed to where a tree had crashed to the ground close by. It lay with its head toward the northeast. Had the wind been more in the west at the time of its fall the roof of the log structure must have been crushed in like an egg-shell.

Will was just about to enter when Frank caught hold of his arm and held him back.

"What's the matter, Frank?" instantly questioned the other, looking around him in surprise.

"Why, I wonder how it comes that the door is ajar. We both know as well as anything that we made sure to shut it securely at the time we left."

"Then Bluff and Jerry must have got back home!" exclaimed Will, excited again. "Since they don't seem to be here, I reckon they've set off to search for us, believing we must have

gone out for a stroll, and been caught in the storm."

"You forget one thing, Will."

"Do you mean the boat?" demanded the other, quickly. "Well, it doesn't seem to be around, for a fact, Frank; and, sure! it ought to be if they'd come home."

"Well, let's go inside now," remarked the other. "If they did come home, and have gone out again, I think they would have left some word for us."

No sooner had the two boys entered the cabin than they could see that some one had been there. A home-made chair was lying on its side on the floor; also some things had been swept from the heavy table which Frank had repaired so that it stood firmly on its four legs now.

Will looked around, and then turned his eyes on Frank.

"Somebody or some animal has certainly been in here since we left yesterday, or I miss my guess!" he announced.

"There's no question about that," returned Frank, a puzzled look on his face. "And as we fastened the door in the only way we have, which would prevent any but an educated monkey from opening it, I can't believe any wild beast entered here. Take that from me, Will."

"Then of course it must have been a human being," remarked Will, for Frank's decisions seemed to leave no other explanation possible.

"I'm wondering why he came in here, and what he did," continued the other, as he wandered about the place scrutinizing everything. There's not a sign of anybody's sleeping in one of our bunks, and so far as I can make out there's been no cooking going on here since we had our lunch yesterday, because I remember just how I put everything away then."

"Frank, it's certainly a deep mystery."

"Oh, well! what's the use of bothering our poor heads over it when there was no mischief done. Let's get busy with something to eat. I'm as hollow as a drum right now, and I'm not ashamed to say it, either."

When presently the coffee began to throw out the most tantalizing odor, and the sizzling bacon added its quota to the aroma, the boys felt they could hardly wait until things were ready.

Munching some crackers helped them to hold off a bit, and presently, when things were done, the welcome call to breakfast sounded.

The lake must have been rough and high during the previous night's gale, for the waves still rolled up on the beach in places, though the wind had changed.

"Don't you think they must have started from over yonder by now?" Will was asking as he and Frank began to eat more slowly, having taken the fierce edge from their appetites.

"Yes, the sea has gone down enough by now to let them take chances," Frank admitted; "and after we're through eating we'll use the glasses to find out."

Although he had not said anything about it to his chum, Frank believed he had detected a moving spot far away on the water, and in the direction of the village, which he thought might be the camp boat with their two mates.

He did not hurry through his breakfast, for as the object was constantly drawing slowly but steadily nearer Cabin Point they would be better able to discover who the occupants of the boat were later on.

Will kept the other to his promise, and in good time the small but powerful pair of field glasses was brought out and adjusted.

Frank took the first look. He did not say a single word or betray the result of his survey by the faintest smile, only handed the glasses to Will.

"My sight must be different from yours, Frank, because I have to focus all over again. There, now I reckon I've got it O. K. because I can see

the village over there as plain as anything. The boat ought to be this way—there, I've got it located. Oh, Frank, it's Bluff and Jerry, as sure as you live!"

"Of course it is!" declared the other. "And now you can see that I hit the right nail on the head when I tried to figure out what they'd probably do in the storm. They spent last night among the villagers, and started this morning just as soon as the water went down enough to make it seem safe."

"They're almost half-way here as it is," continued Will; "and rowing like fun, let me tell you! Well, that relieves my mind a heap. I couldn't feel altogether easy about the boys, knowing what an old tub that boat is at best. But it's all right, Frank; and I think I can drink another cup of coffee on that."

"We ought to have some ready for them when they get here," suggested thoughtful Frank; "though of course they'll have eaten breakfast at the village. But a cup of *our* fragrant coffee is something to make you forget you're tired."

"Yes," agreed Will, "I warrant you they didn't get anything like that over there at the village tavern, or wherever they put up."

They spent much of their time watching the approach of the boat. The sunbeams glinted

from the flashing oars as they were methodically raised and lowered. All the while it came nearer and nearer.

"I can see that they're anxious about the camp, and wondering how we came through the storm," ventured Frank; "because every once in a while they stop rowing, seem to be talking together, and then turn around to stare this way."

"Let's step out in the open, and I'll wave my big red bandanna to them, Frank."

"They ought to see that easily enough," laughed the other; "I remember the old bull did that time he had you treed for several hours. Now stand ready, and as soon as I give the word start to waving, while we both shout."

It was easy to tell when the rowers looked around again, thanks to the powerful glasses; and while Will waved his red bandanna, both of them yelled vociferously.

"They see us, because they're waving their hats now!" observed Frank.

"Yes, and I can hear them shouting," added his companion.

Slowly the boat drew nearer, until in the end it was run up on the sandy beach of Cabin Point. Then Bluff and Jerry scrambled out, stretched their stiff legs, and picking up several bundles that had lain in the bottom of the craft, started

toward the cabin, sniffing the welcome odor of coffee as they came.

"Looks as if you'd got what you went for," remarked Frank, as he hastened to relieve one of the boys of his burden, a cardboard box, evidently holding several dozen eggs.

"We did all of that," replied Bluff, "and then had to hold the fort through the night because of that nasty little tooter of a storm."

"Listen to him! Trying to make out it didn't amount to much after all!" laughed Jerry. "I wish you could have seen him holding on to the chair he was sitting in at the village inn, whenever there came a terrific blast that made the house shake all over. I even heard him ask the landlord if it was bolted down to its foundation."

"Well, to own up to the honest truth," said Bluff, with one of his wide grins, "it was a regular buster of a howler. I never saw such wind or rain, and my ears ring even yet from the smashing thunder-claps. Wow! but you two must have wondered what was coming when that big tree came tearing down to the ground not thirty feet away from the cabin."

"But we didn't hear it fall," said Will, mysteriously.

"What do you want us to believe by your saying that?" demanded Jerry.

"We didn't happen to be around these parts just then, you see," continued the artist, smilingly. "Fact is, we spent the night under a ledge of rock some miles away from here, hungry and cold as could be."

"Suppose you up and tell us what happened?" said Bluff. "Why so much mystery, I want to know? What took you away, and how did it come that you never noticed that old whooper coming up in time to hurry back to camp?"

"Oh, Frank and I took a little stroll after lunch," remarked Will. "You must know I've been wild to see that place belonging to Aaron Dennison, and snap off a view of it, because Bluff said it is such a remarkable affair. Well, we got the picture, all right, and also one of the owner of the ranch holding up a big cane as though about to strike Frank here."

"Gee whiz! tell us more about that!" begged Bluff, eagerly.

"After you get started on that coffee we made for you," said Frank. And while the two boys were enjoying their cups of hot coffee the story was related.

Then those who had gone to the village were asked about their trip. Nothing remarkable had happened except that on several occasions they were compelled to bail out, and had once to stop

in order to pound more oakum into an opening that appeared in one of the seams of the boat.

"Excuse me from ever taking such a long trip again in an old rattletrap of a boat like that," declared Bluff. "Luckily for us, you insisted on our carrying a bunch of that oakum along, Frank. With it we patched up more seams this morning, and managed to pull through, though it's been a hard drive."

"But we've lots of dandy fresh eggs, and five pounds of new butter," added Jerry, proudly.

"The storm came up before you could start, I suppose?" questioned Will.

"Yes, and Bluff here wanted to pull out anyhow," Jerry replied, "but I kicked on that, and some of the villagers also warned him it would be suicidal—yes, that's the exact word they used, Bluff, and you know it. What if I'd given in to you, and we had been caught all of a sudden by that hurricane? Well, I'll bet deep down in your heart you're just as glad as anything I kept you from making that silly start."

"Sure I am, Jerry! and I hope you didn't really think I meant to go. I was only trying to keep up to my reputation and name as a bluffer. All the while I knew as well as anything we never could get a quarter of the way here. I've cut

my eye-teeth for all I sometimes make out to be so brash and bold."

Frank and Will only laughed at the expression of disgust they saw creeping over Jerry's face. Surely all of them ought to know Bluff well enough by this time to understand that he did not always mean what he said.

"And now," remarked Frank, "see if either of you can figure out this mystery." With that he told them how he and Will had found signs of some one's having been in the old cabin on the point between the time they had left it and their late return on that morning.

CHAPTER XV

DAYS OF REAL SPORT

"You're dead sure nothing was taken, are you, Frank?" Bluff demanded first of all, his suspicions running in the direction of a sneak thief.

"We looked, but couldn't find the first trace of anything having been stolen," he was assured. "Things seemed knocked around a bit, and the door was ajar, though we left it tightly closed, but that was all."

"It surely is a deep mystery," admitted Jerry, with a puzzled expression on his face. Jerry had never been remarkably clever at finding out hidden things, and the whiff of a mystery generally confused him.

"I'd be inclined to think it must have been some sort of animal," ventured Bluff, "only you feel certain you fastened the door, so a dog or a wildcat couldn't get inside."

"Besides," spoke up Will, "if it had been any sort of animal bent on getting something to eat, wouldn't we see signs of his nosing around in the cabin?"

"That's a fact," admitted Bluff, immediately, "there's that shank of our ham lying right on the table where we left it. I said we'd boil the same the first chance we got, so as to get the pickings. Any dog would have pulled that on to the floor and gnawed at it."

"Oh, well, what's the use guessing when we haven't got a single clue to go on?" remarked Jerry. "Let's change the subject and talk of something pleasant."

"One thing I know," said Will, with a happy smile.

"Then tell us, won't you?" asked Bluff.

"I'm going to set my little trap again to-night for Br'er 'Coon," continued the enthusiastic amateur photographer.

"Huh! wonder what you'll spot next time?" observed Bluff. "You nailed an old fellow that you tell us is Aaron Dennison himself. I hope the next crack won't give us a picture of the Old Nick himself, horns, split hoofs, forked tail and all! Ugh!"

"Well," muttered Jerry, "seems to me when you set one of those flashlight traps right in the woods of nights you never can tell what kind of a job you're going to get away with."

Will laughed as though amused.

"Why," he went on to say, "don't you under-

stand that's part of the game? The uncertainty of the thing adds to the charm. You never do know exactly what you're going to strike."

"Well," Jerry continued, shaking his head in a contrary fashion as though far from convinced, "I never did take much to the grab-bag business —putting your hand in, and groping around to pull out a prize or a blank."

"Ditto here, Jerry," spoke up Bluff; "I prefer to know what I'm trying for, and then chasing after it for all I'm worth."

"Oh, well, what's the use of talking?" Will concluded. "Many men, many minds. It's a mighty good thing everybody doesn't think alike. Variety is the spice of life, they say. But excuse me, fellows; I've got some work to do developing the snaps I took yesterday."

That was the last they saw of Will for some time. Once he buried himself in that fascinating photographic labor to which he was devoted heart and soul, it required some strong incentive such as a summons to dinner, to make him break away.

After noon had come and gone, the boys settled down into something like the old life. Less was said about events that had occurred, while new plans were being broached for the immediate future.

Having secured some live bait with a little

seine made of mosquito netting, Bluff and Frank tried the fishing, using the boat to reach what seemed to be good ground. A hidden ledge of rock ran from the point, and Frank judged that where the water was something like ten feet deep there ought to be bass.

His figuring proved to be correct, for they were soon busily engaged in playing the fish that struck the live minnows. At times the work became even exciting, as a larger and more gamy fish took hold.

Jerry, who also liked to fish, watched the sport from the shore and envied those who were thus engaged. The next time he was asked by Bluff to accompany him in the boat Jerry's answer would be of a different nature. This was a time when his laziness cost him dearly, he admitted to himself, as he watched Bluff lift a struggling bass into the boat, and then heard him give a yell of triumph.

Will had long since finished developing the films, and all they had heard him say with reference to them was that they seemed to have turned out "pretty fair."

About three o'clock in the afternoon, however, he set to work and printed a lot of proofs by the aid of the sun which aroused the interest and admiration of the other three.

Frank in particular was delighted to find they would have such splendid views by which to remember their singular adventure. The one of "Old Aaron and His Rod," as Will designated it, was perfectly clear and reflected considerable credit on the artist who had snatched it off on the spur of the moment.

Over the proof that showed the strange ledge of rock under which the two storm-bound fugitives had passed the night, Bluff and Jerry lingered longest. There seemed to be some peculiar fascination about the picture that held their attention.

"Some time soon, Frank," said Bluff, "we must go up there and take a look into that cave under the rock. It was a bright dodge on your part to notice the formation of the ground in passing, and then remember it right away when the necessity arose for shelter from the rain, wind and lightning."

"Which only shows," remarked Will, shaking a warning finger at Bluff, "that you ought to keep your eyes about you every minute of time when you're tramping through a woodsy country. You never know the second you'll be called on to remember something. And also let me say that it's best to have along with you a chum who never gets left, no matter what happens."

Even Frank had to join in the general laugh that greeted this wise sally.

"My advice to you all is, never depend on anybody else to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, but learn to do things for yourself," was all the remark Frank would allow himself to make.

They had fresh fish for supper that evening, and such fish! Bluff himself cooked them, and of late he had proven himself to be a most excellent hand at getting up a meal.

His method, of course, was the usual camp way of using fat salt pork melted down in the pan until it was sizzling hot; then placing in the fish, nicely covered with cracker crumbs, and allowing the fish to become browned all over, as well as fairly crisp before pronouncing them done.

Every one enjoyed them, and it was voted unanimously that fish should form one of the staple dishes of their stay in camp at Cabin Point.

Judging from the game qualities of the bass, there would be no lack of candidates for the honor of pulling them in. Even Will, who did not as a rule profess to be much of a sportsman, declared he believed he would like to test that new "pole" which his father had given him for

Christmas; at which Bluff groaned, and immediately threw up his hands in affected horror, exclaiming:

"Pole! For goodness' sake, Will, never call that dandy lancewood rod by such a degrading name again. The farmer's boy cuts a pole from the bushes, or buys a fifteen-foot one at the grocery store, the kind that comes up from the Louisiana swamp districts. A true sportsman carries a jointed *rod*—spell it out, r-o-d. Why, I'd turn red to the roots of my hair if ever you said 'pole' in the presence of real disciples of Isaac Walton."

"Oh, well, 'rod,' if you prefer it that way," chuckled Will. "But no matter what you call it, the farmer boy's pole is generally the one that knocks the persimmons down."

"That taffy about the genuine sportsman buying his fish from the barefooted farmer's boy is as old as the hills," retorted Bluff. "Maybe it's been true in some cases; but I've seen the time when the man with the fly tackle, and who knew how to use it, got all the fish, while the barefooted boy could only look on."

"There!" exclaimed Frank with a laugh, "I knew the worm would turn some day. Up to now there's been no champion for the man with the fancy fly rod. It was the boy who used the hum-

ble worm who did all the business. He'll have to take a back seat after this when our chum Bluff is around."

No one knew whether the flashlight did its duty on that particular night or not—that is until Will hurried out early in the morning and brought his camera in.

He had cleverly arranged it so that when the cord was pulled that set the cartridge off it also caused the time-exposure arrangement on the camera to work. Thus for perhaps several seconds the delicate film was exposed, after which the action caused it to become once more securely hidden from the light. In this way it was not necessary for the operator to get out to his camera before daylight came in order to save his night's work.

All of them had slept soundly. If Frank did happen to arouse several times during the night he saw and heard nothing to indicate that there were any animals prowling around in the vicinity of the camp.

Will knew, however, that his trap had worked, for the bait was gone, the cord pulled taut, and he could even detect traces of sharp claws around the spot.

It turned out that he had managed to secure a splendid snapshot of the big fellow boasting the

striped tail; indeed, the picture was bound to be one of the most prized in all his collection.

That day also passed with nothing unusual happening. The campers enjoyed every hour of it, for there always appeared to be a variety of things awaiting their attention, and all of the boys were full of vigor.

Bluff noticed that it had gradually grown quite warm, after the delightful cool spell following the big storm.

"And a hot wave means another rattler, I should guess," he declared when discussing the weather with his comrades.

Bluff had of late shown a disposition to prove himself somewhat of a weather prophet. He studied the various conditions of the sky, noted the mottled clouds that people used to say denoted rain, consulted calendars he had brought along that explained the phases of the moon, and every little while solemnly announced that according to all the signs such and such a condition of weather was going to follow.

It was on the second morning that Bluff outlined his plan. Waiting until they had all eaten the excellent breakfast which he himself had prepared, and until he had reason to believe Frank must be in an especially good humor, Bluff spoke up.

"Frank, why not all of us go up to that rock ledge to-day before the weather takes a turn for the worse? How about it, Jerry; are you game for a tramp?"

"Every time," came the immediate response; "and as you say, if we're going to have a look in at that queer section of the country, to-day's as good a time as any."

To the delight of both boys, Frank offered no objection. In fact, he himself felt rather inclined to do a little more exploring, for the country in that region interested him deeply. And so presently the four left their cabin camp to plunge into the woods.

CHAPTER XVI

SHOWING BLUFF AND JERRY

It pleased Frank to set out in almost a direct line for the rocky ledges. He wanted to cover once more the ground which he and Will had passed over on their way to camp.

"In the first place," he explained to the others when they remarked on this fact, "there were several interesting sights that Will said he wanted to snap off; and his supply of film had run short the other day. Then we know this route, and can point out a lot of things. Besides, it's a short way to the place, which is a good excuse for taking it."

In due time they reached the rocks, and both Bluff and Jerry must creep under the friendly ledge, to see for themselves what sort of shelter their chums had found from the storm.

"Couldn't be beaten, and that's a fact, Frank!" was Jerry's final verdict, after he had remained under the rock for a time.

"And in such a terrible electric storm," added

Bluff, sagely, "I don't know of a better place to take refuge than under a shelf of rock. There's no danger of being struck by the lightning, and only a slim chance of an avalanche tumbling down on top of you."

"All boys ought to make a note of a thing like that," urged Will, wisely nodding his head as might a school-master. "When a storm comes along in summer time, with thunder and lightning, they should never dream of taking shelter under a tree or in a barn. Frank, I'm right there, I reckon, am I not?"

"Every time!" responded the other vigorously. "It's better to drop flat down in the open and take a good ducking, rather than risk chances under a tree or in any sort of barn. Lightning picks out those objects for a blow. But I think myself a shelf of rock like this is about the finest shelter going."

"And I'll always be on the lookout for places like this," asserted Bluff, who could take a lesson to heart for all his bluffing ways.

"I can promise you I will," added Will, "because while I'm still sore from lying so many hours on that hard stone, I feel deep down in my heart that I ought never to look a gift horse in the mouth. That rock ledge was the best friend we had all through the terrible hurricane."

"Well, we're in no great hurry to get back home, are we, boys?" asked Jerry.

"We started out with the intention of making a day of it," Frank observed, "and there's no reason to change our minds. I'm going to take a turn in a new direction, though in the end we may strike the old trail that leads to the Point from Mr. Dennison's place."

Jerry looked at him eagerly.

"Now it so happens that everybody's gone and seen that place but poor me," he went on to state; "and Frank, if we just happened to be in that vicinity between now and sunset would you mind if I took a peep?"

Frank shook his head as though he did not wholly like the idea.

"The old gentleman seemed pretty huffy when we had our little heart-to-heart talk with him," Will remarked, noticing this disinclination on Frank's part; "and on the way down we made up our minds it was none of our business. Jerry, I can guess that it's the queer cry we heard that interests you more than wanting to see the house itself, for I've good pictures of that."

Jerry laughed.

"Oh! I own up you fellows have kind of excited me a little when telling about that thrilling sound you heard," he admitted candidly. "I'd

like first-rate to do some prowling around up there to satisfy myself that it wasn't a peacock that screamed, or even a tied-up dog that yelped."

"But I hope you'll give over that idea then, Jerry," said Frank soberly. "You must understand that Mr. Dennison is a gentleman, for all he looks so queer and acts so strangely. He's had something upset him in the past, and chooses to live away from everybody."

"Yes," added Will, "and he's got a right to do as he chooses with his own property, you'll allow, Jerry."

"Sure thing!" agreed the other, though with a shade of disappointment crossing his face, "and I guess I'll have to keep my hands off, since the sign is up 'no trespassing allowed here!' But anyway, I do hope we shall run across Old Aaron and his Rod somewhere in our jaunt today."

Frank had nothing more to say on the subject. He was determined not to yield to any temptation, and enter those forbidden grounds again after being so plainly warned off by the irascible owner.

Leaving the rocky section of country, they began to traverse a region quite different in its character. From time to time various interesting things cropped up to attract their attention.

Bluff and Jerry wanted the photographer to snap off all sorts of what they called "mighty absorbing subjects," but Will wisely used his fine discrimination.

"Why, look here," he finally told them, "if I took your advice right along I'd be out of stock in the film line before half the day was over. And I don't know of anything to make a fellow feel worse than to have used his last film and then run across a subject that he'd give heaps to get."

"Will is right, boys," remarked Frank; "leave it to him to decide things like that. I'd stake a lot on his judgment, you must know."

"Well," commented Will, with a chuckle, "I'm a ninny when it comes to lots of things connected with outdoor life; but I do know something about taking pictures, if I say it myself."

At noon-time they stopped and rested for more than an hour, and ate the cold lunch that had been provided. It was warm, and consequently no one felt sorry for the chance to lie in the shade.

Frank afterwards swung around in a half circle. He kept his bearings all the time, and professed to know accurately just where they were, and in what quarter the camp lay.

"For what's the use of claiming to be a woods-

man," he told Bluff when the other looked a little incredulous over something or other, "if you don't keep track of your direction? I feel sure that as the crow flies Cabin Point lies over there, right beyond that tree with the feathery crown."

About three in the afternoon all of them owned up to feeling a bit weary.

"But I reckon we must be getting within a mile or so of the lake," Jerry suggested. "I'm saying that partly because I've noticed how Frank has swung around, and is heading in the direction he pointed out when he told of our camp lying in that quarter."

"You hit the nail on the head when you say that, Jerry," commented Frank; "for we're going to strike the old trail before another ten minutes passes."

"Meaning the one that leads to the lake from Aaron's place, eh, Frank?" continued Jerry, with a sparkle of expectancy in his eyes.

"That's right, Jerry," he was told quietly.

"Then I hope——" began the other, stopping suddenly, with half-opened mouth, to listen, for just then there came to their ears a half-muffled sound that might be the scream of a red-headed woodpecker up on some rotten treetop, or anything else for that matter.

Will and Bluff uttered exclamations indicating

that they recognized the cry. Even Frank looked serious, while Jerry was plainly excited.

"Frank!" he exclaimed, "was that the queer cry you fellows told me you heard those two times you were up here?"

"I think it was," replied the other; "but please don't go to getting excited over it, Jerry. You know we agreed it was none of our business whether a peacock on the lawn or a dog in his kennel let out that yawp. The only thing that interests me about it is the fact that we have proof that the high board fence around Mr. Dennison's place ought to loom up any minute now."

Hardly had Frank said this than Bluff broke in with his customary abruptness.

"Right now I can see a little patch of the same fence over yonder, Frank. Notice that big beech, and look under the slanting limbs. How about it, am I right?"

He was immediately assured that his eyes had not deceived him, for it was certainly a small section of the tall fence that he had discovered.

"I hope you will go close enough anyway," ventured Jerry, "so I can see that strand of cruel barbed wire you say runs along the top of the fence."

"Oh! there's no reason you should be cheated out of that little favor," he was told by the

leader. "The fact is we have to pass close to the fence in order to strike that trail through the woods."

"The one he took when he struck my trap, and set my flashlight off, eh, Frank?" asked Will.

"Of course it was that trail and no other," said Frank; "you remember we followed it before, and came to the Point. We also agreed that it was used by the old gentleman once in a while when he took a notion to go down to the lake."

"Well, here's the fence, Jerry!" observed Bluff, as they came to a full stop.

Jerry surveyed it critically, even stepping back the better to see how the barbed wire entanglement ran along its apex.

"A rather tough job to get over that fence," he was heard to say, as though half to himself, "though I reckon I could manage it if pushed."

"But I hope you'll never try it," ventured Frank, severely.

"I was wondering," continued Jerry, paying no attention to the reproof, "whether that barbed wire was put there to prevent outsiders from getting in, or to keep some one who was in from breaking out!"

Frank started, and looked serious. He even exchanged glances with Will, as though they

might have a little secret between them; but at any rate he did not see fit to encourage Jerry to pursue the subject any further.

"Suppose we let the matter drop now," he said, in that way of his which all of them considered final.

They once more moved along, and, in following the plan Frank had of reaching the old trail that led through the woods and tangle to the lake, they kept close to the high fence.

Jerry looked around him from time to time, and whenever he chanced to discover a knot-hole in one of the boards he immediately glued his eye to the aperture as if in hopes of glimpsing the hermit's house, or something else equally interesting.

As they did not hear him utter any expression of satisfaction after several of these attempts, the others set his labor down as futile.

A short time later they neared the lower end of the fenced-in estate. Frank knew he would run upon the trail near this point, and accordingly he had his eyes fixed on the ground looking for the first signs.

On this account he was not the first to discover something that came to pass. It was when he heard an exclamation from Jerry that Frank looked hastily up, and saw to his dismay that they

were once more face to face with the same old gentleman whom he and Will had encountered.

Aaron Dennison had evidently stepped through a narrow gateway, for the opening appeared just behind him. He must have been quite as astonished as the boys at the unexpected meeting. Frank could see that he was very angry, for his face turned red, his eyes gleamed, and the muscles of his cheeks worked under the strain.

Knowing the impetuous nature of one or more of his chums, Frank hurriedly blocked the path so that none of them might pass by. Then, trying to control his own feelings, he faced the scowling owner of the mysterious retreat in the wilderness.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WARNING

"So this is the way you keep your word, is it, boy?" demanded Mr. Dennison, as he glared at Frank, who, however, managed to keep cool and collected, because he could easily understand how the old gentleman might deem their presence there very suspicious.

"But what I promised you, sir," said Frank, "was that we would not trespass on your enclosed property again, and we have done nothing of the sort, sir."

"Then why do I find you here, alongside this fence that was constructed to keep such curious people as you from intruding on my privacy? I believe even now it was your intention to enter again by that loose board, which, however, I had nailed fast in order to keep lawless prowlers out."

"You wrong us, Mr. Dennison," declared Frank; while Bluff could be heard muttering his indignation. "Just how we happen to be here is easily explained."

"Of course. And you expect me to believe any kind of silly story you may make up, I suppose?" snarled the angry owner of the property.

"After we left you the other day, sir, my chum and I walked many miles into the woods, to see the country, and find some views, for you remember he is a photographer. We were caught unawares by that storm, and had to spend the night under a rocky shelf. Our comrades were naturally curious to see the queer place that had been of such great use to us, and so to-day we took a trip up there."

"Here is a picture of the rock ledge, Mr. Dennison, so you can see we are telling you the truth," and Will eagerly held up one of his proofs as he spoke, which he had hastily taken from his pocket in order to convince the obstinate old gentleman.

"But that does not explain your presence here," objected the other, though he had deigned to glance at the really excellent sun print, for Will of course had remembered hearing him say that he, too, took a great interest in photography.

"Having set our faces toward home," explained Frank, "it was only natural, sir, that we should make for a trail we had been over before. That brought us out close to your place, and we are at this very minute making for the corner

below, where I remember we can find what we are looking for, the trail to Cabin Point."

Mr. Dennison looked doubtfully at Frank. Few people could resist believing anything the boy said, for his manner was convincing; but apparently there was some unknown reason for Mr. Dennison's being unusually suspicious.

He shut his teeth hard together as though repressing some sign of weakening.

"Whether you are telling the truth or not, boy," he said sternly, "I want you to understand once for all that you must not come up here again. I shall instruct my men to keep a constant watch for trespassers, and deal severely with them. This place is posted, and any one who dares to enter does so at his own risk. I hope you understand that, for I should not like to have anything unpleasant happen to boys."

"Yes, sir, we understand what you say," replied Frank, "and I give you my word of honor again that none of us will trespass on your grounds. If ever we enter there again it will have to be on invitation from the owner. I can safely speak for my chums as well as myself."

This last was really meant for impulsive Jerry, just to notify him that under no conditions must he dream of making Frank's promise void.

"Then see to it that you keep away from here,"

said Mr. Dennison, as unyielding as ever. "Even now you are camping on my property, and I could order you away if I chose to be harsh. But I have not forgotten that I too was once a boy. You can stay at Cabin Point unmolested by my men, but only on condition that you avoid this region up here."

With that he stepped suddenly back and closed the gap in the board fence by pulling the door shut after him. The boys walked on, Jerry looking disappointed.

"Course I'm glad to say I've actually seen the queer old hermit," he remarked, "but even there I'm away behind the rest, for all of you have been inside the dead line, and glimpsed his odd house. Oh, well, don't look at me that way, Frank; you know mighty well I don't mean to make you out a liar by sneaking up here and poking my nose into his private business."

"Huh!" grunted Bluff presently, as though he had been thinking deeply over the whole matter, "what's he got in there, anyway, he's so afraid that people should see, I'd like to know! It's all mighty mysterious, take my word for it, fellows. But then, like as not none of us will ever know the truth."

Again did Frank and Will exchange that sudden glance and nod, showing that the little secret

they shared in common must have some connection with the subject Bluff was even then harping upon.

On the way home the talk of course reverted several times to Aaron Dennison and his strangely fenced-in property. But although many suggestions were brought out in the discussion, none of them were fully accepted as correct.

Frank and Will remained almost silent, and let the other two do most of the talking. If the opinion of the former was requested now and then he gave it off-hand, but neither Bluff nor Jerry found much to encourage him in the information thus gleaned.

Frank never once lost the dim trail on the way home. He had no difficulty whatever in following his course, because by now he was getting familiar with it; and since several of them had tramped over the ground there were many signs to be found that had not been there the first time.

A tired lot of boys it was that joyfully greeted the sight of the cabin on the Point late that afternoon.

"But after all's said and done," declared Bluff, "we've had a bully day!"

"And I've added considerable to my stock of pictures, if only these turn out O. K.," added

Will, his mind, as usual, running to the one great subject.

Later on he and Frank happened to be left alone. Bluff had gone down to the edge of the lake to clean some fish left over from the day before, being kept in the water at a shady place; while Jerry was trying his hand at mending the leaky boat.

"Let me see that first picture you took of the house, Will," remarked Frank.

"I keep it separate from all the rest," explained the other, as he drew out a little book, and opening it took a print from between the leaves. "You told me to do that, Frank."

"Because I didn't know whether we ought to let the other fellows into this suspicion we've got between us," said Frank, as he accepted the litttle print that displayed the building inside the high board fence. "And right now I'm wondering if we hadn't better keep this out of their sight until we get home."

"I take it to mean you're afraid of Jerry and Bluff?" queried Will. "They are both of them determined fellows, once they take the bit in their teeth. That face might tantalize Jerry so much that he'd give in."

"Of course it's struck you, Will, that there are what seem to be bars across that window, though

neither of us remembers seeing them at the time. For that matter we failed to glimpse the white face or the waving handkerchief."

"Frank, you've been thinking this business over," observed Will, soberly; "please tell me what decision you've come to. I've kept my word about not dropping a hint to the other fellows, as you asked me; and I've also hidden this print away from them. What does it mean, Frank?"

"Of course you must remember that I'm only guessing," replied his chum. "In the first place then, it seems that old Aaron is keeping some one a prisoner up there!"

"Whew! is it as bad as that?" gasped Will.

"It's impossible to make out whether the owner of that white face is a man, a woman or a child," continued Frank, slowly; "but I'm pretty sure the window has bars across it. The person saw us, and tried to attract our attention, but made no sound just then, you remember. Afterwards we heard that cry."

Will was plainly much exercised. He seemed to shiver as though he felt a chill creep over him.

"But Frank, what would old Aaron keep any one shut up in his place for?" he demanded. "Why, it would be against the law, you know, to deprive any one of his liberty."

"Not under certain conditions, Will," he was

told; "and perhaps Mr. Dennison has the backing of the law in what he's doing."

Will stared hard at the speaker.

"Oh! do you mean, Frank, that the person behind that barred window might be a madman?"

"That's the only reasonable explanation I'm able to scare up, Will. Suppose, now, his wife went out of her mind years ago. He cared so much for her that the thought of having her confined in any ordinary insane asylum was repulsive to him. What would he do then, having plenty of money?"

"It sounds reasonable to me, for a fact. Who could blame him if he built this house, and surrounded it with a high fence that would keep the inmate from escaping when allowed in the grounds with an attendant? Yes, I shouldn't wonder but that you've guessed the truth, Frank. Everything seems to go to prove it. And then, after all, can you blame him for getting so huffy when he believed we were trying to pry into his terrible secret?"

"I don't think he acted queerly, if what we suspect is true," ventured Frank.

"On my part I'm inclined to feel sorry for old Aaron," declared Will, who had a tender heart. "He looks like a man who has suffered heaps. And then, you know, he's interested in

the same things I am, which ought to make me think of him as a fellow artist."

After more talk Will hastily hid the tell-tale print as Jerry was seen approaching. The other looked a little suspiciously at them as though he wondered why Will secreted something so hurriedly at his coming; but other matters arising, he soon forgot the circumstance.

On the following morning Bluff and Jerry went out in the boat to fish, and the latter soon found himself enjoying the thrill that comes to the angler when fast to a vigorous two-pound black bass bred in the cold water of a big northern lake.

The fun grew when Bluff struck the mate to Jerry's fighter, and both boys were put to their best efforts in order to save the fish, as well as to keep them from fouling the lines, in which case one or both might have broken away.

In the end they managed to scoop up both prizes in the landing net, and this gave them more pleasure than many generals would find in capturing a fortress.

About ten o'clock the boys came in. Jerry said they were tired of sitting in the sun and playing havoc with the fish, for they had put back many small ones, being real sportsmen. Bluff, on his part, admitted that he was tired, but declared it

lay along the line of baling out the leaky boat, and not of taking fish.

"Hey! you two fellows in camp, come down here and look, if you want to see a sight good for sore eyes!" called Jerry, as he jumped ashore and commenced to drag the old boat up on the sandy beach.

Accordingly Frank and Will approached to look at the catch, and not only admire but tender their congratulations.

"As fine a mess of bass as I've set eyes on in many a day," announced Frank.

"Hello! see who's coming past the cabin, and heading for us!" exclaimed Will. "There's Mr. Dennison, to begin with, but I don't know the other man."

"Well, we do, don't we, Jerry?" ventured Bluff, a vein of uneasiness in his voice. "We happened to talk with him over at the village. You can see the badge on his coat from here. That tells who he is—the constable of the village, and he said he was also the marshal of this district. But what under the sun does he want at *our* camp, I'd like to know!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ACCUSATION

Frank Langdon watched the two men hurrying toward the beach with an uneasy feeling in the region of his heart. He could easily see that Aaron Dennison looked angry, and from this it was not difficult to surmise that fresh trouble hung over the heads of the Outdoor Chums.

"Whew! what's in the wind now, I wonder?" he heard Bluff asking himself; and so far as that went both Jerry and Will were also plainly disturbed.

The two men quickly reached the spot where the boys were grouped. Jerry mutely held up the two finest bass he and Bluff had taken. It was as though he meant to show that they were engaged in legitimate sport, such as boys in a summer camp were supposed to follow.

"Here they are, the young rascals, Mr. Jeems. Now do your duty!" exclaimed Aaron Dennison, harshly.

Bluff managed to catch the eye of the con-

stable whose acquaintance he and Jerry had made when in the lake village. Perhaps he gave him a humorous wink. At any rate, the tall lanky man shrugged his shoulders and immediately remarked:

"I guess that you'd better tell the boys what you be suspectin' them of, Squire. I don't know nothing about the same, and I'm only here to do what I believes to be my bounden duty as an officer of the law."

"But I explained to you," expostulated the old man, "that my treasured cup disappeared mysteriously, and also that yesterday I came upon these four boys acting in a suspicious manner close to my enclosed grounds."

"*Outside* your grounds, you said, Mr. Dennison," urged the constable.

"That is very true, Constable. But I chance to know that on two different occasions some of their number actually had the brazen audacity to push their way through a gap in the fence."

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed the other, trying to look very fierce; but when he saw that whimsical grin on the features of Bluff the attempt was not much of a success.

"Worse than that even," continued Mr. Dennison, whipping himself into higher rage. "That boy with the angel face had the nerve to take

a picture of my house. I caught him in the very act. Think of that, Mr. Jeems, will you?"

Frank could have laughed if the situation had not been so very serious. It seemed as though Mr. Dennison looked on such a thing as any one's taking a picture of his hidden home as a capital offence; hanging would about fit such a terrible crime, according to his opinion. And Will's "angel face" vastly amused them all.

Desirous of finding out what all the trouble was about, Frank now turned his attention to the irate old gentleman. When he spoke his voice was as soothing and respectful as he could make it; for Frank believed in pouring oil on troubled waters.

"Mr. Dennison, you surely are very much mistaken if you think for a minute that either I or any of my chums would ever steal anything. We are proud of the reputations we have in our home town of Centerville. None of us can understand what you are accusing us of doing, just because we happened to be up in the neighborhood of your place yesterday."

"Where you had no business to be," snapped the other.

"Perhaps not, sir," continued Frank, "but I explained to you just how it happened. And I

rowdy companions to my house, and that the occasion will allow you to satisfy your vulgar curiosity to the bent."

These cruel words struck the boys severely. Bluff was heard to mutter half under his breath, while Jerry frowned and bit his lip as though he found it very hard to keep from telling Aaron Dennison what he thought of him.

Frank himself had to hold back the angry words that tried to escape his lips; the insult was so uncalled for, so unjust, he thought.

"Of course, sir, if you have that sort of opinion of all boys," he went on to say, deliberately, and with considerable dignity for a mere lad, "you wouldn't want us bothering around. I only meant to show you how ready we are to lend a hand. I am sure that if the cup you speak of wasn't simply mislaid it must have been taken by some one belonging to your own household, and may be returned again."

The angry man chose to see some hidden meaning back of Frank's words, which were after all only natural, considering the circumstances.

"There, straws show which way the wind blows!" he exclaimed, turning toward the constable; "and you can see, Mr. Jeems, how these boys have been talking over my private affairs among themselves. They are really consumed

by a curiosity to know about matters that do not concern them; and in prowling around my place have perhaps been tempted to take things that did not belong to them."

"But Mr. Dennison, if this prize gold cup was so precious why did you leave it around so that it could be easily taken?" asked Will, suddenly, as though this idea had struck him as strange.

"Because in the first place," replied the old man, "I was fool enough to believe my people were as honest as the day was long; and the thought that any outsider would ever try to enter my house never came to me until lately. In fact, it was after meeting you boys in my grounds that I began to feel uneasy, since I saw it would be possible for a robbery to occur, once desperate men conceived the plan to break in."

"And even then you did not put the golden cup away in some place of security—you continued to leave it out where servants and others could reach it, did you, sir?" Frank continued, with something of a lawyer's skill at cross questioning.

"It was beginning to worry me," confessed the old man, frowning. "I found myself wishing my nephew would hasten his return, and take possession of his prized cup. Then last night I had a bad dream in which it seemed to me that

thieves entered my house, and among other things took away Gilbert's loving cup."

"Last night, you say, sir, this happened?" questioned Frank.

"Yes, and it gave me such a shock that when I awoke and remembered the dream, the first thing I did was to hurry to the closet where two days previously I had placed the gold cup. It was gone!"

"Of course you questioned your servants, sir, to learn if any one had misplaced it?" asked Frank, bent on understanding everything.

"They were filled with consternation," continued Mr. Dennison. "I have a housekeeper, a nurse, and two men employed on the place, no more. One of them suggested that I send to the village and have Mr. Jeems come to the house. While waiting for the constable I suddenly remembered about meeting you boys yesterday, and like a flash it struck me that you were guilty."

"That is a hard thing to say about us, Mr. Dennison," urged Will. "What object could we have in taking your gold cup? We have plenty of money, as you can discover by telegraphing to Centerville; and our neighbors will vouch for our honesty."

"I do not know," said the old man, rubbing his forehead as though puzzled. "Boys have

always been a deep mystery to me. I never had one to raise, for as a baby he was taken away from me; and I have always felt it was that loss which unsettled—but it does not matter. I believe you might have carried off the gold prize cup won by Gilbert in the golf tournament last year, perhaps thinking it a lark. So I am prepared to say to you here and now, if such was the case, and you will immediately restore my property to me, I will say nothing about it. If you refuse, it will go hard with you."

"But Mr. Dennison!" expostulated Frank, "we have never so much as set eyes on any sort of a gold loving cup, so you can see how impossible it would be for us to hand it over to you."

"And what is more," burst from the indignant Bluff, unable to hold back any longer, "we insist on your searching all our duffle to see whether we've got that cup hidden away."

"Yes," added Jerry, "I'm sure none of us would feel right if you didn't examine every bit of our possessions. We're in just the same position as Joseph's brethren when they were leaving Egypt, and overtaken by a messenger who said a cup or something had been stolen while they were getting corn at the capital."

"Hey! what's that you're saying, Jerry?" exclaimed Bluff, startled by the comparison, "don't

you remember they did find the lost thing, and in Benjamin's pack, too?"

"But it was put there at the orders of Joseph, wasn't it?" demanded the one who had told the old-time story; "and for a purpose too. But make your mind easy for they can't play that game on us. The lost cup isn't at Cabin Point."

"Then you will offer no objections to our making a search, do I understand?" asked Mr. Dennison, eagerly.

"Rather, we insist on your doing that, sir!" said Will, promptly, for it galled his proud soul to be under suspicion, especially when such a thing as the taking of a valuable piece of property was concerned.

Frank immediately led the way to the log cabin. Mr. Dennison paid not the least attention to the fact that the boys had done so much to make the forlorn place habitable since taking possession. All he seemed to be thinking of just then was that missing golden cup, and the possibility of discovering it somewhere among the possessions of these young boys, to whom he had taken such a violent antipathy.

They passed inside the old building, which, if the guess of the boys was correct, had long years before been the home of Mr. Dennison at a time before he possessed much of this world's goods.

"I call on you to help me in the search, Constable!" said the owner of the cabin.

"And we will only too gladly do all we can to assist, sir!" declared Will, who secretly meant to keep hold of his camera, for fear lest it be knocked to the floor and injured beyond repair.

Upon that every one began the search. Mr. Dennison did not do so much himself, but he kept those keen eyes of his constantly on the watch, as though to let nothing escape him.

The constable apparently did not fancy his job. He went about it in what appeared to be a half-hearted fashion. In fact, when he and Bluff came together, as the boy emptied his clothes bag, and shook each individual extra garment, the wearer of the nickel badge muttered something half under his breath that sounded in the nature of an apology.

Evidently Mr. Jeems was a believer in boys, if the old hermit was not. And when Frank afterwards learned that he had seven youngsters of his own at home, he knew the reason of the constable's sympathy.

By degrees the search included every nook and cranny about the old cabin where it seemed possible an article like the missing golden cup could be secreted. Still nothing rewarded the efforts of the constable.

"It shore ain't here, Mr. Dennison!" remarked the perspiring officer, as he dropped the empty clothes bag belonging to Jerry; "and I guess we'll have to give the hunt up, sir."

"Wait!" snapped Mr. Dennison, his eyes sparkling afresh, as though a sudden and brilliant thought had flashed across his mind. "It stands to reason that a thief would be apt to hide his plunder in some place where he believed it could not be easily found. Of course it was not among their clothes. But perhaps there may be other secret hiding places."

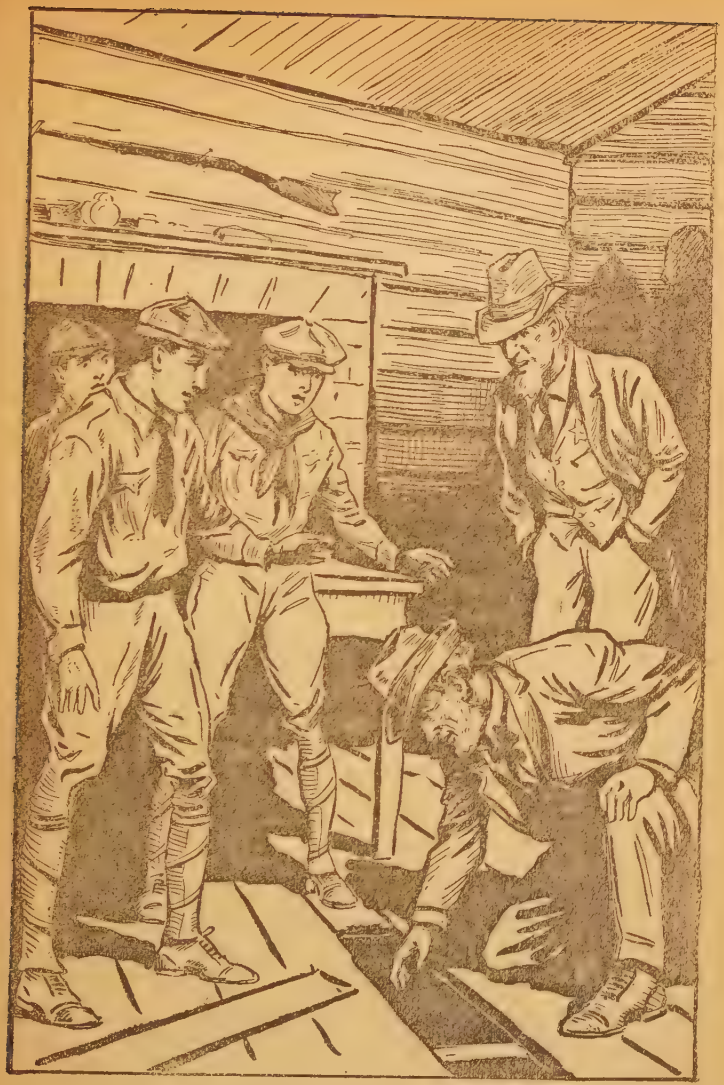
He seemed to glance around at the bare walls. Then Frank saw him drop his gaze toward the floor.

"That's a loose board there, Mr. Jeems," the hermit said excitedly; "see if you can raise it. I should think a cavity under that board would offer a safe hiding place for anything that had been stolen. Lift it up, Mr. Jeems, and let us see."

"I will help him do it!" exclaimed Bluff, eagerly, and leaning forward he inserted his fingers in the crack, and secured a good hold of the loose plank.

The constable, also, had by this time taken a firm grip on the board.

"All together, son; there she be!" Mr. Jeems



MR. DENNISON LEANED EAGERLY OVER.—*Page* 183

The Outdoor Chums at Cabin Point.

called out, as he strained himself at his task; and in another second the plank was placed to one side.

Mr. Dennison leaned eagerly over. Then, uttering a cry of mingled delight and savage satisfaction, he snatched an object from the gaping hole, and hurriedly held it up so that every one could see plainly what it was.

Frank and his three chums held their breath in astonishment, for they found themselves looking on a loving cup made of gold, upon which were fashioned various beautifully executed designs especially interesting to those who were devoted to play upon the golf links.

CHAPTER XIX

REPAYING HIS DEBT

"Gee whiz!"

Of course it was Jerry Wallington giving vent to the feeling of utter amazement that very nearly overcame him. His words accurately expressed the feelings that filled the heart and soul of the other three chums as well.

Meanwhile Mr. Dennison was holding that wonderful trophy aloft, and laughing to himself. He acted as though wild with delight over its recovery. Frank was watching him closely, and could see no sign of "make-believe" in his actions.

"What did I tell you, Mr. Jeems?" cried the old hermit, excitedly. "I said they had taken the cup, either to sell it, or in a spirit of boyish mischief. And now you'll believe me, because here we find it hidden under the floor of their cabin. The young rascals—to add to their offense by trying to deceive us so! Do your duty, Mr. Jeems; I will prosecute them to the limit of the law!"

Frank began to feel anxious. He could see that Mr. Dennison meant what he was saying. Even the recovery of his property had apparently not softened his heart as might have been expected.

All then depended on the constable. If he showed a disposition to assert his authority there would be an untold volume of trouble, and their vacation plans would be "all messed up," as Jerry would say.

"Mr. Dennison," said Frank, trying to keep his voice steady, "I am glad that you have found your lost golden cup; but I want to tell you, sir, none of us knows the least thing about it, nor how it happened to be in that hole."

"A likely story, boy," sneered the other, "which may and may not be believed by the justice of the peace when you are brought before him. Evidence no stronger than this has hung men before now."

"Whew!" gasped Bluff, startled more than he would have cared to admit upon hearing the vindictive old hermit talk in that strain.

Jerry and Will were both indignant.

"When we first came here," said the former, "we tripped so many times over that loose plank that we raised it up to settle the earth underneath. There was certainly no gold cup lying

there then where you just now found it, I give you my word on that, sir!"

"Certainly not," agreed Mr. Dennison, "because at that time it was safe under my roof. But I want you to notice, Mr. Jeems, that they admit knowing of this hole under the loose plank. It made a very good hiding-place for valuable property, as you can see."

"Yes, sir," suddenly spoke up Frank, "and apparently this is not the first time it has been used for that same purpose. When we looked we found this silver coin there, a part of an old yellow envelope, and this fragment of what seems to have once been a baby's shoe."

He picked the several things up as he mentioned them, for they had been lying on a little shelf, where Frank himself had placed them days before. Watching Mr. Dennison's face, Frank saw it turn white as the eyes of the old man were focussed on that poor little remnant of what had once been a baby's shoe.

Involuntarily the old man thrust out his hand, and Frank quickly dropped the article into his palm. He could see that Mr. Dennison was very much affected. Doubtless memories long since buried were once more resurrected by the sight of that reminder of his once happy past.

Frank wondered whether he would relent and

decide to let matters drop, or once more demand that the constable take them all to the village, to be held for trial before the justice.

When he saw the man thrust into his pocket the fragment of the tiny shoe, the leather of which was now dried up and hard, and then frown again at them, Frank expected the worst.

"Since you have also tried to deceive me, after robbing my house in this shameless manner," said Mr. Dennison, "I believe I shall be only doing my duty toward the community if I see to it that you are severely punished."

"Do you mean, sir, that you would have us arrested?" asked Frank.

"That is exactly my present intention," affirmed the other, showing that he was still angry, and bent on punishing those he believed to have wronged him.

"But you have found your cup again, sir; and we still declare on our honor that until you picked it up just now none of us has ever set eyes on it before."

When Frank said this he found the keen orbs of the hermit fastened on his face as though the other would read his very soul through the windows of the boy's eyes; but not once did Frank flinch.

"That is very true, boy," said Mr. Dennison,

"but I believe in justice, and that it is the wrong thing to be too lenient with culprits. When young fellows are given to such practices as this they need to be brought up with a round turn. So I mean to have the constable arrest you all!"

To the astonishment of Frank and his three companions, just at that moment there was a new element injected into the game. Some one hurriedly entered the cabin; and somehow Frank breathed a little more freely when he recognized the newcomer as the young man whom they had been able to help while on the way to Cabin Point.

It was Gilbert Dennison, the old hermit's nephew.

"Please wait a minute before you go to such extreme measures, Uncle!" he exclaimed, as he hurried to the side of the hermit, whose face lost some of its stern expression as he recognized his relative.

"I'm glad to see you again, Nephew," he observed; "and pleased to give over into your keeping the cup you value so highly. I shall insist on your taking it back to town with you when you go. It has already given me one bad scare, and I do not feel able to stand another, with all the troubles I already stagger under."

"But what is this I heard you say about having these boys arrested, Uncle?" continued Gilbert. "Surely you must believe them when they protest their innocence? I have been up at the house, and was told about the cup's disappearance; also that you had come down here with the constable, meaning to have some one taken up for the crime. But I hope you will not think of doing such a thing now."

"I consider it a sacred duty I owe to the community, Nephew," urged the stubborn old hermit. "All the circumstances point to one of these boys as the culprit, and he should by all means be punished. Why should you interfere with my designs, Gilbert?"

"Let me tell you, Uncle," burst out Gilbert, eagerly. "I owe my life, it may be, to these same boys."

"How is this?" asked his uncle, looking somewhat bewildered. "They did say they had met you while on the way here, but in what fashion could they have done you a favor?"

"In my hurry to catch the train after the vehicle broke down," explained Gilbert, "I stumbled in a very dangerous place on the road, lost my footing, and fell over the edge of a precipice. I managed to clutch hold a dozen feet down, but must in the end have let go and fallen to the

bottom only for the coming of these boys, who rescued me in a remarkably clever and very unusual way."

Bluff gave a satisfied grunt. After all Gilbert was a pretty decent sort of fellow, he made up his mind; though at the time of the adventure Bluff had thought him rather ungrateful to hurry away so fast, and not half thank them for all the trouble they had taken.

Mr. Dennison apparently had reason to believe anything his nephew said. That was evident from the change that came over his manner. He looked at Frank and his three chums again, shrugged his shoulders, and then went on to remark:

"Of course if that is the case, Nephew, and you are indebted to these boys for helping you out of a bad fix, I have nothing more to say. Because of that they can go free, for all of me; though I may live to repent my kindness; because no matter how they protest, the fact remains that the cup was found under this floor, and I still firmly believe they secreted it there."

The kind-hearted constable was grinning as he winked at Bluff. It was very evident that the new conditions pleased Mr. Jeems; since he was relieved from executing a most disagreeable duty.

Mr. Dennison told the officer to come outside

with him, and Gilbert added that he would join his uncle in a minute.

Left in the company of the four chums Gilbert's first act was to offer Frank his hand. It was done with such a boyish freedom that the other eagerly grasped the outstretched hand, and squeezed it in return.

"Of course it goes without saying," began the college boy, "that I do not believe any one of you could do such a thing as steal my cup. There's a queer mystery about its being found under this floor, and I intend to discover the truth before long. In the meantime I hope you'll stay here and enjoy yourselves the best way you know how."

"And we'd like to see more of you, if you expect to stay around here longer," spoke up Jerry, impulsively.

"I promise that you shall," assented Gilbert; "because I, too, am fond of camping, fishing, and all such things; and I can see how my stay up here might be prolonged indefinitely, if such a jolly set could be found to help kill time."

"Did you win in the golf tournament?" asked Bluff, as though to show that they knew about his ambition in that sport.

"I'm sorry to say that I came in a poor second this time," laughed the other; "and I really be-

lieve it was because I didn't have the kind of balls I'm in the habit of using."

This was the opportunity poor anxious Will had been waiting for.

"We've got your bag safe and sound here, Gilbert!" he exclaimed, springing forward to pick the leather receptacle up, for it, too, had been closely examined by the constable, acting under Mr. Dennison's orders; "and I certainly hope my precious Maine films are in the same condition."

"Make your mind easy on that score, my boy," he was told by the other; "although I was terribly provoked when first I opened the bag and saw them, I understood that the mistake was all mine. So I took good care of your films, though I had a photographer make me a print from the whole bunch. I must say they are some of the most interesting pictures I've ever seen. I wanted Uncle to admire them, for he, too, is devoted to photographic work."

Of course this news caused Will to lose the anxious expression that his chums had noticed on his face at times.

"The bag I left up at the house," continued Gilbert, "but you shall have it in a short time. There's uncle calling me, so I'll have to move along; but you can expect me again before long," and with that he hurried out of the cabin.

CHAPTER XX

GROPING IN THE DARK

"WELL, I feel as weak as a sick cat, after meeting with such an adventure as that!" exclaimed Jerry, after he and his three chums once more found themselves alone in the cabin.

"To think of our being accused of being common, every-day thieves!" grumbled the indignant Bluff. "Why, it just makes my blood fairly boil!"

"But I'm mighty glad to know my films are all right," Will burst forth with, and this remark showed that this important fact took precedence of all others in his mind.

Frank stepped over to the opening where the plank had been removed, and glanced down as he rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Look here, fellows," he said to the others, "all of you saw the hole under this board that time we found the coin, the half of an old envelope with Mr. Dennison's name on it in faded writing, and that baby shoe; isn't it so?"

"Of course we did, Frank," assented Jerry; "and I want to make my solemn affidavit to the fact that there wasn't any gold cup lying there then."

"Will, you are just as positive about that as Jerry, of course?" continued Frank.

"Well, I should say I was!" came the prompt reply.

"And you too, Bluff?" Frank went on, evidently intending that there should not be a single dissenting voice in the group.

Bluff immediately lifted his hand, with the fingers stiffened as though he fancied himself on the witness stand.

"Give you my word for it, Frank; nothing doing," he asserted in his customary vigorous manner, that was usually very convincing.

"Gilbert came up to the scratch smiling, didn't he?" remarked Jerry; "and I take it he's going to turn out a pretty decent sort of a fellow."

"Queer, isn't it," Will was saying, "how chickens do come home to roost? When we stopped a little while on our way here, and pulled Gilbert up by the use of that wild grape-vine, none of us ever dreamed he'd be in a position to return the favor, and yet see what happened. What's that old proverb about the bread thrown to the fishes, or something like that?"

"You must mean 'bread cast upon the waters will come back again ere many days,'" explained Frank, smilingly.

"All right, no matter how it runs, it worked, you see," continued Will. "We got Gilbert out, and now he has returned the favor."

"Huh! strikes me he kept us from getting in," interrupted Bluff; "because the old gentleman seemed bent on ordering Mr. Jeems to arrest us, and throw us in the village lockup."

"Luck still seems to hang out with us," ventured Jerry; "and you know they say it's a heap better to be born lucky than rich. Money may fly away, but so long as luck stands back of you it's easy to get everything you want."

"But all the same that mystery of the golden cup bothers me," said Frank.

"Yes, that's a fact," added Jerry. "How in the wide world could it ever have come into this cabin, when we know it wasn't here a few days ago?"

"Mr. Dennison admits it was safe in his house until about the day before yesterday," continued Frank; and then he cast a sly look out of the tail of his eye in the direction of Jerry.

Truth to tell, Frank was just a trifle uneasy concerning that member of the little party. There was a shadow of a reason why he

should feel that way, too. He could only too easily remember how impulsive Jerry had hinted that he felt a great temptation to try to find out what the secret of the hermit's house was. At the time he expressed this longing Frank had taken him severely to task; and Jerry had promised faithfully to forego all effort to pry into matters that were none of his concern.

Jerry as a rule could be depended on. When he gave his word about anything it was as good as his bond, and Jerry was proud to declare that.

Frank could not bring himself to believe there could be anything in this sudden thought. Even if Jerry had crept out in the night-time while his chums were fast asleep, how could the boy possibly have made his way along the trail to the hermit's place, have entered the house and carried off the valuable cup, to hide it under the cabin floor?

No wonder Frank decided that such an explanation of the mystery was impossible. Even if they never learned the truth he could not bring himself to suspect any of his chums of doing such a monstrous thing.

To the surprise and also the consternation of Frank, he found that Jerry had noticed his manner, and he immediately accused the other.

"I can guess easily enough what you're think-

ing, Frank," asserted Jerry, with offended dignity marked in his manner; "but 'tisn't so, I tell you. I never set eyes on that old cup before he snatched it up out of that hole."

"No need of your saying that, Jerry," declared Frank, "because I believe you are as innocent is I can be myself. I only happened to remember that you talked of wanting to sneak up there and spy around a bit, though you owned it would be mean. And I also chance to know that you've been around every hour since you came back from the village."

"I'm blessed if I can make head or tail out of the game," admitted Jerry. "I never was a good hand at guessing answers to riddles; and say, let me tell you this thing is the toughest nut to crack that ever came our way, eh, Frank?"

"It's going to bother us a heap, that's right, Jerry."

"But somehow I've got my little hunch, Frank, that in the end you'll hit on the answer. It may take a lot of time and figuring, but I sure believe you can do it."

"It may be Gilbert can help us out," suggested Will, just then.

"But how would he know anything about the job," objected Bluff, "when he just got back from that golf tournament?"

Frank bent down and looked closely into the hole.

"All we know for certain is that somebody put that gold trophy cup in here," he observed reflectively.

"Yes, and if the old plank could talk it'd be easy for us to get at the truth. But then of course that isn't possible," Jerry remarked, with a sigh.

"Help me to put the plank back in place again," said Frank, and after this had been done he commenced to work at it as if to see whether one person could manage to raise the heavy board.

"It can be done, you see," was what Frank said, as, managing to get his fingers underneath, he raised the plank a little.

"Now what's the line you're figuring on, Frank?" demanded Jerry; "because it's as plain to me as the nose on my face that you've struck a strong clue."

"Yes, tell us what it is, won't you, Frank?" urged Will.

"Well, listen," the other began to say, slowly, as with upraised finger he marked off each point in his theory. "Look back a little, Will, to when we got home here after our high jinks up in the woods. Don't you remember what we discovered the first thing?"

Will thereupon uttered an exclamation, while his face lighted up with eagerness.

"That's so, Frank!" he exclaimed; "we knew somebody had been in here after we started out the afternoon before. The door wasn't shut close, and a chair lay on its side on the floor. Besides that, a number of little things showed they had been disturbed. Yes, somebody had been in the cabin!"

Jerry gave a shrill cry in which delight could be traced.

"It was that person, then, who hid the pesky old cup under the loose plank; that goes without saying, Frank!" he announced, as though his mind was made up to that fact and could not be easily changed.

"Well, even if we agree on that," said Bluff, "how're we going to learn who the intruder was? To tell you the truth, it gets me why a sneak thief would steal just that gold loving cup of Gilbert's, and then come all the way down here to hide it under the floor."

"Frank, you're keeping something back; I can see it in your face!" cried Will. "Tell us, do you think old Aaron put that cup here himself?"

"Whew! that would be the limit, I should say!" gasped Jerry.

All of them waited to hear what Frank would

have to say. The leader of the Outdoor Chums did not reply hastily, for Frank did not wish to commit himself in so grave a matter without due consideration. Still, he must have had his mind made up fairly well, for presently he started to answer.

"Let's see, fellows, how the case stands," he told them. "We know that long ago Aaron Dennison once lived in this cabin. We also know that he probably kept what little money he owned in those days down under that loose plank. The finding of that old mouldy half dollar points toward that. So you see he knew about the cavity under the board."

"So far as that goes, Frank," observed Bluff, "you could see by the way he had the constable raise the plank that he knew. But I was watching his face at the time, and let me tell you he looked as astonished to see the cup lying there as any one of us did, and that means a lot."

"That's what bothers me," admitted Frank; "one minute I seem to think Mr. Dennison put the cup there; and then again I'm just as certain that he believes us guilty of stealing it. We'll have to keep trying to find the answer; but just now, Jerry, you and Bluff had better get busy cleaning those fine bass you hooked, if we mean to have them for dinner to-day."

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNEXPECTED APPEAL

THE fish were what Bluff called "gilt-edged." Perhaps he was a little prejudiced in the matter, because he had had a share in capturing the gamy fighters. But there was not a dissenting voice when Jerry moved that they pronounce the finny denizens of the big lake unequalled for their many fine qualities.

That evening, as they sat around taking things easy, for it was rather warm and the fire not needed, the conversation ranged over a wide field. Many events of the past were recalled, one thing seeming to lead to another.

Will was fairly bubbling over with joy on account of his recent streak of good luck. He counted the promised safe return of those precious films as a glorious thing.

"Why shouldn't I feel that way?" he expostulated, when Bluff took him to task for referring to the matter so frequently. "Think of our great trip up into the Maine wilderness and the

many strange things we saw there," he went on, referring to matters already related in "The Outdoor Chums in the Big Woods." "My pictures took a prize, remember; and besides they recall the happy days we spent up there last fall."

"Will is right," declared Frank; "and I'm almost as glad as he is over the recovery of his property; because I know he's got some sort of scheme in his mind to enlarge some of those same pictures. It couldn't easily be done with the negatives lost."

"Before we shake the dust of this section from our feet," continued the ardent photographer, "I mean to explore every rod of territory around here."

"Looking for new and interesting sights, of course?" quizzed Bluff.

"Yes, because you never do know at what minute you may run smack up against the most wonderful picture going," pursued Will. "That's one reason I'm so keen about traveling over new ground. There's always a chance ahead of you."

"Well, right here we're bounded on one hand by the big water, which cuts off about half your chances," suggested Jerry.

"Some time or other you might go to the lake shore village," said Bluff; "because if I'm any

judge of things you'd find some remarkable characters there to snap off."

"You've already got pictures of old Aaron and his hermit shell; one of the latter being a cracking good snap of the house. How did the other view turn out, Will?"

Again that quick look of intelligence passed between Frank and Will. They were still of the opinion that for the present there was no necessity for the other boys to know about the strange white face in the barred window of the hermit's lonely home.

"Oh! it doesn't seem to be quite as clear as the one you saw," Will explained. "The sunlight didn't strike as well, and there are too many shadows. Some time or other when I think of it I'll take off a lighter print, which may improve the looks of the thing."

Not having the least suspicion there could be anything singular connected with that second view of the hermit's house, Bluff did not pursue the subject any further.

Of course Will had his flashlight working again. In roaming around he had found traces of a sly fox that made its home amidst some rocks, and Will, after more or less hard study, believed he could see the regular track taken by clever Reynard in coming and going.

"There's one thing sure," remarked Will, proudly, when relating how he had investigated, and figured, and found out many things in connection with that particular little animal, "this hunting with a camera certainly does force a fellow to become acquainted with the habits of every kind of bird and animal."

"There's no doubt about that, Will," Frank immediately assented; "and I warrant right now you're in closer touch with Nature ten times over than you'd have been if you hadn't taken up this fad or hobby."

"I should say so!" continued the enthusiast, his face kindling with earnestness. "Why, before that I never bothered my head much about the habits of foxes, 'coons, squirrels, minks, bobcats, or anything that had its hiding-place in the woods or in burrows under the rocks. But now I'm forever trying to learn new things about the way they live, and how they get their food."

"Of course I can understand that," admitted Jerry; "us fellows who love to hunt wild game have to know a lot about their habits. It's the same if you go after the wily black bass—if you're green about his ways you can fish till you drop and never get a single bite."

"I've had something to do with both kinds of sport," said Frank, seriously; "and I want to say

right here that I certainly believe hunting with a camera beats the gun business all hollow. You get in closer touch with the little animals when you're only trying to take their pictures, and not harm them. I warrant now Will often counts them as his friends, and that they show little fear of him."

That launched the camera advocate into a fervent description of many meetings with his coy subjects, and the tricks he was compelled to resort to in order to let them understand he meant them no harm.

So the evening passed pleasantly.

There was nothing in the way of a disturbance to break in upon their sleep. Will had posted his camera trap a full quarter of a mile away, and even if it worked at any time during the night they would not know it.

The moon arose about the middle of the night, but none of the boys had any use for the battered lantern in the sky, since they remained under the cabin roof until morning broke.

As before, they took a little dip in the cold waters of the lake in order to get in good trim for a warm day. Then breakfast followed, and was heartily enjoyed, although with their healthy appetites there was nothing wonderful about that.

Each of them had laid out plans for the morning.

"We'll give the bass a rest for one day," remarked Bluff; "because if we make it too common the zest of catching and eating them is apt to wear away. Besides, I don't believe it's as good a morning for fishing as yesterday was. Then, we'd have to use that little mosquito netting seine, and get some more minnows."

"Last but not least," laughingly added Jerry, "the cranky old tub of a boat leaks again like a sieve, and some of us ought to get busy patching it up while we have a chance."

"Yes," said Will, who of course knew that the job would never fall to his share, "I always believe in having everything ready beforehand; because you never know in what a big hurry it may be needed."

Of course Will had hurried out to where his camera lay long before he would touch a bite of breakfast; he even gave up the early morning dip in his anxiety to learn whether the bait had been jerked, and the camera made to do its duty.

By this time Will had become quite expert, so that there was little danger of what Bluff, taking his cue from the golfers, would have called a "foozle."

To see the joy written upon his face when he

came hurrying back to announce almost breathlessly that success had rewarded his efforts, one might even suspect the boy had never before succeeded in photographing a sly fox in this manner.

It was a busy morning for all.

Frank rather expected to see Gilbert, but when noon came and the other had not as yet put in an appearance he decided that he must be detained for good reasons. Perhaps by another day he would find it convenient to drop in and see the campers at Cabin Point.

"From the way he talked," Bluff remarked, when at lunch they were speaking of Mr. Dennison's nephew, "I got the notion that Gilbert would like to stay over here a spell with us, and enjoy some of our doings."

"He did say he was fond of camping, and for all we know he may have been around some up in Michigan or Wisconsin," suggested Jerry.

"Well," added Bluff, a little boastfully, "when it comes to experiences I reckon the Outdoor Chums don't have to occupy a back seat! We might relate some things that would make Gilbert sit up and take notice."

"I think he's the kind of fellow who would enjoy hearing about the things we've seen and done," Frank told them. "I'm glad now I brought along my little note-book in which I

jotted down many of the things that have happened since we first got together and formed the 'Rod, Gun and Camera Club.' "

"Yes, and I'm fond of looking over that journal of yours myself, Frank," admitted Will. "Of course I didn't have as big a part in a whole lot of the adventures as the rest of you, but all the same they belonged to our crowd."

"And then don't forget, Will," continued Frank, "that Mr. Dennison admitted to us he was fond of photography. Gilbert said as much, too, when he spoke about having a set of your Maine pictures printed to show his uncle. You may get on good terms with this singular old man, and have some mighty pleasant times in his company."

"He looks pretty severe," commented Will, "but then there's a reason for that, I guess; and once he gets thawed out he'll be a different sort. Nothing like finding a fellow's pet hobby and working it, to make him friendly."

None of them thought to go far away during that afternoon. It did not look very promising, for clouds could be seen hovering along the horizon, the heat was intense, and all of them agreed that a storm might creep up.

Their last experience in a storm had been so unpleasant that somehow they seemed to shrink

involuntarily from a repetition so soon. Later on, when the memory became fainter, they might again take risks, after the manner of bouyant youth the world over.

Bluff and Jerry were pleased with their work on the boat. They had taken great pains this time, and felt sure the calking was there to stay. Still, they contented themselves with planning another fishing excursion for the coming morning. Bluff had discovered a place where minnows were very plentiful, and hence they could be assured of a good haul at any time, with but little exertion.

The day was nearing an end, and there was some talk of getting supper ready when a cry from Jerry outside the cabin brought the others hurrying forth.

They found him talking with a small boy who seemed greatly excited, for his face was peaked and white, and terror could be seen in his dilated eyes.

Apparently he had hurried in a veritable panic through the forest, for he had various scratches on his face, and a lump on his forehead showed where he had struck a stone after tripping over a root or a vine.

Naturally Frank and the other two were at once filled with curiosity to know who the boy

was, and what had brought him to Cabin Point. Jerry had already started to question the panting lad, and the other was trying to explain, although his words came in jerks and disjointed sentences.

"I'm Sandy Moogs—my dad's a wood-chopper —workin' now up yonder 'bout three miles—tree fell on him—broke his leg, he reckons—in a heap o' pain—can't hardly crawl—knowed you-uns was at Cabin Point—sent me to git help—he sez as how he'll bleed to death by mawnin' if he ain't helped—I hopes as how you'll kim along with me—he's my dad, you know!"

The four exchanged looks when this pitiful story was unfolded in gasps. It was a foregone conclusion that they would go, for never had the Outdoor Chums rejected an appeal for assistance.

CHAPTER XXII

FIRST AID TO THE INJURED

"Of course we'll all go, Frank!" Bluff was saying, almost before the boy who had given his name as Sandy Moogs finished speaking.

Frank had to decide without much waste of time, and he did so in his customary sensible way.

"This woodchopper is probably a pretty husky sort of fellow, as most of them are," he said, loud enough for the others to hear; "and if he's in such a bad shape we may even have to carry him all the way here, so as to look after his hurts, and keep him out of a storm."

"We could make a litter and carry him, you know, Frank," suggested Jerry.

"Just what I had in mind," the other agreed.

"And it would need four to carry a heavy man for a long distance," was Will's comment; "so that means we must all go along."

"Then we'll call it settled," Frank decided.

"How about supper?" came from Jerry,

faintly, as though he felt bound to mention such an important matter, and yet at the same time experienced more or less shame about seeming to be greedy.

"Have to wait until we get back," the leader announced. "If anybody is near the starving point right now let him pick up some crackers to munch as he trots along."

No one seemed willing to display such weakness, for there was only a rush to get hats and coats, while Frank made sure of the camp hatchet and some heavy twine, as well as a piece of strong canvas that could be used in making the stretcher on which the injured woodchopper was to be carried.

By this time the small boy had managed to get his breath. He looked pleased on discovering that the campers meant to respond so handsomely to his appeal for aid. It could be plainly seen that Sandy cared greatly for his father, and now that the prospect of the injured man's being assisted had grown brighter, the boy felt greatly relieved.

After all, only a brief time elapsed before they were ready to start. Frank had of course seen to it that Doctor Will carried along some of his stock in trade, in the shape of bandages and liniment. They would certainly be needed, for the

boy had assured them that his father was losing considerable blood because of his wound.

"You're certain you can take us straight to the place, are you, Sandy?" asked Frank, just as they were ready to start.

"I shore kin do that same!" replied the sturdy little chap. "I was born in the woods, and never got lost even onct. I smell my way dark nights."

This last assertion amused Bluff and Jerry, but Frank knew what the boy meant. He had been given an intuition that never failed him in so far as direction was concerned. If asked a question in connection with any point of the compass he could reply with positive accuracy, and without the slightest hesitation.

Watching how he made his way along, Frank soon ascertained that the boy was actually leading them over the very route he had taken in making for Cabin Point. He proved this several times by pointing out where he had fallen when an unseen vine caught his foot; or made a little detour in order to avoid some thorny bushes that had scratched his face and hands on the other occasion.

One mile, two, had been passed over, and still the boy led them on. Sandy had called it about three miles, and since he was so remarkably clever at woodcraft in so far as direction went, Frank

hoped his knowledge of distance might be equally accurate.

No one complained. Even Will, who was less robust than his mates, and not as accustomed to hurrying along through dense woods, shut his teeth hard together and persevered. He had been sensible enough to leave his camera behind, Frank having convinced him that it would be an unnecessary burden, for if they had to carry the wounded man all that distance back to the cabin they would find their hands full without other impedimenta.

After more time had elapsed the question was put to the boy.

"Are we nearly there now, Sandy?"

" 'Most nigh the place," came the prompt reply. "This here's the burnin' where the charcoal was made last year. On'y a little furder, an' we'll be up to dad. And oh! I hopes he's alive yet, I shore does!"

Frank of course comforted him the best he could.

"Your father is a big strong man, Sandy, and like as not he knows something of the way to stop some of the bleeding by using a rag twisted around a stick and pressed down on the artery. Most woodsmen do, I've found. He'll be all right, Sandy. And boys, let's all give a loud

whoop. It may encourage the poor fellow some to know we're coming along."

Accordingly they united their strong young voices in a brave shout that could easily have been heard half a mile away. Although they listened they did not hear a reply. A woodpecker screamed as he clung to a rotten treetop; some saucy crows scolded and chattered as they craned their necks and looked down on the line of passing boys; but all else was silence.

Sandy was evidently worried because of this, but Frank reassured him.

"He doesn't want to waste what strength he has in shouting, Sandy; but three to one we'll find him waiting for us to come along. How far are we away now?"

"Oh! it's just over there at t'other side of that rise!" gasped the boy.

They pushed quickly on, increasing their pace if anything, such was the anxiety they were now beginning to share with poor Sandy Moogs, the woodchopper's son.

"I see him!" cried sharp-sighted Jerry.

"There, he waved his hand at us, Sandy, so you see he's all right!" added Frank, only too glad of the opportunity to relieve the pent-up feelings of the dutiful son of the injured man.

In another minute they had reached his side.

Frank and Will began immediately to busy themselves with attending to his injury. Bluff and Jerry, taking the hatchet, started to hunt for the proper kind of poles with which a litter could be framed.

Frank instantly saw that the man had suffered a serious injury. Not only was the leg broken but the flesh had been badly lacerated, and he had lost a large amount of blood.

It turned out just as Frank had said, for the woodchopper, after Sandy had run away to seek aid, had bethought himself of a way to stop some of the bleeding. His method of procedure was crude, but it had been on the well-known tourniquet principle of applying a bandage with the knot resting as nearly as possible on the artery above the wound, and then by twisting a stout stick around and around increasing the pressure as far as could be borne.

When Frank saw what he had done he told the man his action had likely enough been the means of saving his life, for in the two hours that had elapsed since the boy left him he might have bled to death.

Will of course was quite in his element now. If there was one thing in which he excelled besides taking pictures it lay along the lines of medicine and practical surgery.

Indeed, Frank himself was only too glad to take orders from the other chum at such a time as this, although he too knew considerable about caring for gunshot wounds, broken bones, and such accidental happenings as are apt to occur in the woods.

While the two amateur surgeons labored to the best of their ability to stop the bleeding, and set the broken bones, at least temporarily, Bluff and Jerry had taken a little saunter around the place looking for stuff that could be utilized in making the litter.

"Here's where a hickory tree was cut down a year or two back," said the former, finally, "and all around the old stump new growth has set in. Some of it is as much as an inch or more thick."

"Yes, and just the sort we want for our litter," Jerry admitted; "so get busy with your hatchet, Bluff; and when you feel tired let me have a show for my money."

As the camp hatchet was always kept exceedingly sharp it bit into those hickory stems "like fury," according to Bluff; and one after another they fell before the onslaught.

Then the straightest and strongest were selected for the outside poles, which must be gripped by the four bearers. Across from these, side sections were fastened by means of the strong

cord. Next came the placing of the strip of canvas which had really been fashioned particularly for the very use to which it was now being put. All around the edges brass eyelets had been inserted in the canvas. Through the holes the twine was to be run, enclosing a portion of the side poles with every loop. This procedure would result in giving them a splendid litter.

"I guess Frank was right when he said no party should ever come out into the woods without carrying along a strip of canvas fixed like this one is," Jerry was saying as he laced away vigorously, admiring his work as he went along.

"That's right," assented the other; "because when it's needed it's always wanted in a big hurry. Besides, such a strip can be made useful in many ways. If the ground is damp it comes in handy when you have to sleep with only a blanket between you and the cold earth. In that way it takes the place of a rubber poncho."

"There's one thing bad about all this, I'm afraid," ventured Jerry.

"I hope now," cried Bluff, "you're not mean enough to consider the drain it'll be on our grub resources to have two more mouths to feed! But there, I take that back, because I know it wouldn't be like you even to think that. What did you mean, Jerry?"

"It's nearly night as it is, and we'll sure be overtaken before we cover a single mile. Think of tramping along in the pitch dark carrying a man hurt as badly as he is."

"Between you and me I don't believe Frank will risk it. We can go as far as possible, and when it grows dark pull up. Along about midnight, if it stays clear, we ought to have the moon, and it'll give us enough light to go on again."

It proved to be just as Bluff had said, for when the wounded man had been carefully lifted and placed on the litter, with one of the boys ready to take hold of each corner, Frank set forth his plan.

"We'll do the best we can, fellows, until it gets too dark to see well; then we can lie down and rest for hours. When the moon gets fully up, so that the woods are light again, we'll finish our tramp to the cabin. Get that, everybody?"

The woodchopper seemed to be resting fairly easily now. Of course he was in great pain and often groaned in spite of his close clenched teeth; but the strain on his mind had lessened. He felt confident that these lads would see him through his trouble in some way or other. Their manner inspired the utmost confidence.

Again they left it to the boy to lead the way. His wonderful instinct made him an infallible

guide. Frank would have probably been able to fetch up close to the cabin on the Point, but there was always a chance of his going astray, while Sandy knew no such word as fail when it came to "sensing" direction.

The little procession started. As well as they could, the four boys bearing the litter kept step with one another, since that helped to make the jar less noticeable.

It was no child's play carrying that heavy man through the darkening forest, for unusal care had to be taken constantly, lest a stumble occur that would cause him to cry out with sudden pain.

Just as Bluff had said, they must have covered about a full mile when Frank called a halt, saying that it had grown too dark now to continue the tramp.

CHAPTER XXIII

A LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

When the halt was made they were almost half-way to the cabin on the Point. Bluff grumbled because none of them proved to be a modern Joshua, able to command the sun to stand still for a sufficient time to cover the remaining distance.

"Never mind about that, fellows," Frank observed, after laughing heartily at the quaint remark; "what we want to do just now is to make Moogs here as comfortable as we can, and then try to get some rest. All of us are tired, and we've still a mile and a half to cover."

"And I want to serve warning right now," Jerry announced, "that the first thing we do when we strike camp is to get the fire going, and a big pot of coffee boiling. I'm as hungry as a wolf."

Frank found that the injured man was standing the trip as well as could be expected. He suffered great pain, though at times a sort of numbness came over his limb, as often happens.

Bluff and Jerry had found some dead leaves behind a log, and here they decided to settle down. Frank and Will had already seen to it that their patient was placed upon a bed of leaves, and had made things as comfortable as possible for the poor fellow.

He seemed to be very grateful, and constantly assured them that their kindness would never be forgotten, and that he would only too gladly repay them if ever it lay in his power.

The small boy, Sandy Moogs, crouched alongside his father and seemed happy just to know that everything was moving along in a satisfactory way.

Frank was more concerned about the weather than anything else. There were signs of a brooding storm. The low-hanging clouds they had noticed in the afternoon close to the western horizon might push up and cover the heavens.

That would be a serious thing for them, under the present conditions. To be caught afoot in the woods far from camp by one of those drenching rains was bad enough; but it meant a terrible risk to poor Moogs should he be soaked through while suffering from such a wound.

Still the time passed and there was no particular change in conditions. So long as he could see the stars Frank needed no watch to know the

hour. He knew when the moon would appear in the east, as well as which of the bright planets would set by that time. All he had to do when desirous of knowing how time was passing was to observe the stars.

Jerry and Bluff could be heard talking from time to time. As for Will, who was close to Frank, seeing the other lift his head for a look at the sky above, he asked for information.

"What time do you think it is, Frank?" was what Will said.

"Close to eleven," was the immediate reply.

"Did you guess that, or are you reading the answer in the stars?" continued Will.

"See that bright star a little way above the horizon?" asked Frank. "Well, that's Mercury, and when it drops out of sight to-night it'll be just eleven. When that other brighter planet goes down, look for the moon to peep up. That will be at twelve-seven, according to the almanac."

"You've certainly got it all down pat," chuckled the other, satisfied that what Frank said must be exactly so; for he did not make a practice of simply guessing at things.

It happened that when the big star did pass out of sight behind the far distant horizon Will was watching, being wide awake.

"It's time for the moon to show up, thank

goodness!" he was heard to say, whereupon Bluff from his bed of dead leaves close by called back:

"If you look close you can see the sky lighting up over in the northeast a bit. Trouble was you didn't remember that in summer the moon makes a different sweep, and to do that often rises far away from the true east."

They could all see that Bluff spoke truly, and that before long the darkness that hung over the woods would be partly dispersed. Will had been impressed with what the other had said concerning the phases of the moon. He made up his mind that when he got home again, and could find books on astronomy in the town library, he would study up on the subject, for it promised to be interesting.

They did not start immediately, for it would be some time before the light became strong enough to be of benefit to them. After the moon could be fairly seen the boys sat around and made comments that were not at all complimentary to the heavenly luminary.

"Wow! looks like she'd been out all night on a tear," commented Jerry; "her face is that battered."

"Makes a regular practice of these all-night affairs, I reckon," chuckled Bluff; "no wonder she

looks so peaked. Nobody can stand that sort of life for long and not show it."

"Please quit looking a gift horse in the mouth," pleaded Will. "We're staking a whole lot on that same old moon, it seems to me; and you fellows are an ungrateful bunch. What if you hurt her feelings so she puts her hands over her face, in the shape of black clouds? Where would we be then, tell me?"

Finally Frank decided that they should start.

"Of course we must use an extra amount of care at first," he told them; "and as the moon gets higher up the thing will come easier. But be careful how you go."

"Yes, watch your step!" added Bluff, as he reached down to get a good grip on the end of the litter pole.

The start was made in fairly good shape, and if their movements caused the wounded man new pain he managed to repress his groans. Realizing the great debt he owed these sterling boys, the woodcutter felt that he ought to suppress the signs of suffering, at least as much as he possibly could.

Frank watched to see with what confidence little Sandy again started in the lead. He was immediately convinced that there need be not the least anxiety concerning his ability to serve as a

true guide. The instinct was born in him; if asked how he picked out his course he could never have explained save by saying he *knew* it, and that was all.

When they had covered about a mile Frank called for a rest. He felt sure Will in particular must be getting weak and weary with all this strenuous work, to which he was quite unaccustomed.

Sandy had offered to lend a hand, but was told to stick to his post as guide.

"It's a more important service you can render leading us straight, than the little help you could give lifting," Frank told the boy when, for the third time, Sandy offered to relieve Will.

"We ought to get there on the next turn," decided Bluff.

Jerry was sniffing the night air.

"Why, it seems to me," he remarked, blandly, "that I can just smell the lake, and according to my guess it can't be more than half a mile away."

They waited to rest for about ten minutes. Then as Bluff and Jerry began to manifest signs of restlessness Frank gave the order to move along once more. Will declared that he felt able to keep on for a time, long enough, probably, to take them over the remainder of the ground.

There were numerous occasions when one or

another stumbled, for with poor illumination it was not always possible to see small obstructions. Once or twice the man on the litter groaned, and at such times the boys took themselves to task with fresh energy, afterwards trying more than ever to avoid all such petty pitfalls.

"Pretty nearly there, I guess!" said Jerry, who felt sure he had recognized some of the surrounding woods, although they looked different to him in the weird moonlight from their usual seeming in broad day.

"We'll break out of the trees inside of five minutes," prophesied Bluff, going his chum one better, since he set the time, which Jerry had not.

"Make it seven and I'm with you," Frank told them, knowing that a certain amount of chatter would be apt to make them forget their weariness.

"I even thought just then I could hear water lapping upon the shore, Frank," remarked Will.

"That was what you heard, because I caught it too," he was assured by the one in whom Will placed such confidence.

"Be ready, then, to see our old cabin as soon as we get to the edge of these woods," remarked Frank; "everybody watch, and see who's the first to call out. Of course you two fellows ahead have the best chance."

Shortly afterwards Jerry broke out again.

"Frank, there's the water through the trees!"

"Yes, and with the moonlight playing across it like a pathway of silver," added Will, who was a little inclined to be poetical.

"Home, sweet home," sighed Bluff; "be it ever so lowly there's no place like home."

"Oh! quit that, Bluff!" urged Jerry. "Don't you know you'll make us want to quit Cabin Point and hike for our real homes. Just let's keep thinking of what a spread we're in for, once I get started hustling the supper along. Wow! in fancy I can see it now, with the coffee-pot boiling on the hob and—holy smoke! Frank, what does this mean now?"

"Tell us what's happened!" demanded Will, beginning to show signs of excitement, as Jerry came to a full stop.

"Why, there's our cabin; can't you see, fellows —and as sure as you live somebody's inside it, because the light is shining through the window where that wooden shutter can't be coaxed to close tight. Now I wonder what that funny business stands for."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MYSTERY SOLVED

"Yes, it's a light, that's what it is!" Bluff was heard to mutter.

"This is certainly a queer piece of business, as you say, Jerry," admitted Frank.

"Oh! I hope now it isn't a messenger from home with bad news! That would upset all our plans. And my mother wasn't feeling just up to the mark when I left home, either," cried Will.

Will's mother was a widow, and he had a twin sister named Violet. The three of them lived by themselves in one of the most substantial and beautiful houses in Centerville; so the boy's sudden sense of anxiety could be easily understood. He was really the man of the house, and often felt his conscience stab him when he left his mother and Violet alone.

"Oh! stow that, Will!" urged the more practical Jerry. "It isn't going to turn out as bad as that. How do we know but that they do have hoboes up this way, and that the tramps have

taken a shine to our bunks? Frank, what shall we do?"

Of course they looked to Frank to decide; but as he was used to doing more than his share of the planning for the crowd, he thought nothing of this request.

"First of all, let's put the litter down gently," he proposed.

"That's right, boys," said the wounded man, "don't ye bother any 'bout me, but look after yer own 'fairs first. I'll get on all right, with Sandy hyar to stand by and keer for me."

They were very careful as they put the stretcher down, for only too well did they know how the wretched occupant suffered from any jolt. This having been accomplished successfully, the four chums were ready to take the next step.

"Now we'll go on and see what it all means," said Frank.

He managed to control his voice so that none of the others could discern any undue emotion; yet truth to tell Frank was more worried than he would have cared to admit.

What Will had voiced was in fact the very fear that had flashed upon him. They had left word at home for a messenger to be sent up after them should sickness or accident overtake any of those left behind. And it seemed at least reasonable to

believe that something of the kind had happened.

As the boys advanced eagerly though noiselessly they were keyed up to the top notch of excitement.

When he dropped his end of the stretcher Bluff discovered a stout club lying on the ground. It answered his present needs admirably, and accordingly the boy snatched it up with a sense of exhilaration. To himself Bluff was muttering:

"Tramps, hey? Measley hoboes roosting in our nice shack, are they? Well now, let me just get a whack at the same with this bully home-run bat, and if I don't make 'em sick of their job you can take my head for a football. Tramps, hey? Wow! Count me in the deal, will you? I just eat tramps!"

Frank led the way from long habit. It was perhaps the same training that kept Bluff and Jerry just at the heels of the pilot, although they were in a fever to make faster time.

So far as they could see there was no sign of life about the old cabin, only the light shining through that gap in the wooden window shutter. If a party of vagrants had indeed taken possession of the place they were wonderfully quiet. Not a sound smote the stillness of the night.

Presently, however, from some tree not far away a whippoorwill suddenly sent out his vo-

ciferous notes, complaining again and again of the severe punishment "poor Will" might expect. The cabin was now close at hand. Frank could see that the door was ajar, as though inviting the passerby to enter without the formality of knocking.

"Huh!" Bluff was heard to grumble, as he, too, discovered this fact.

Approaching the window, Frank leaned forward and took a first peep. He did not say a single word, although very much surprised at what he saw; but simply made room for Will, who in turn moved slightly on so that the others might also see.

The wooden shutter, which had been repaired as well as possible, even when closed left a slight gap, and through this hole it was possible for one outside to survey the whole interior of the cabin.

A single figure sat in the most comfortable chair the cabin boasted. The lantern had been lighted, and hung so that its rays illuminated the interior of the place fairly well.

None of the boys had the slightest difficulty in recognizing the person they were looking at through the window. It was Gilbert Dennison.

Somehow or other it seemed that none of the chums had once considered Gilbert when trying to guess who could be in the cabin. When they

now discovered him sitting there, and apparently waiting for them to come in, a great load seemed to be lifted from their hearts.

At least poor anxious Will was heard to give a long sigh of relief. His worst fears were dissipated when instead of some messenger from Centerville he discovered Gilbert Dennison sitting there, watching and waiting.

Frank was also well pleased at the discovery. At the same time there flashed into his mind a conviction that it must be something beyond the ordinary desire to visit them that had brought Gilbert there.

None of the boys paid quite as much attention to secrecy as before. It was different now, since they knew a friend occupied their cabin, and not a party of dusty tramps, who had been making free with their supplies.

Apparently the sound of their footsteps must have reached the ears of the one inside, for as Frank pushed back the door he found Gilbert on his feet. Also, he seemed to be crouching there as much in the shadows as possible; and really his whole attitude struck Frank as astonishing.

As Frank and then Bluff, Jerry and Will pushed into the cabin Gilbert looked at first a little surprised and disappointed; but he instantly

raised his hand to indicate silence, and at the same time pressed a finger on his lips.

These mysterious actions astonished the four chums. They stared as though they found it difficult to believe their eyes.

"Gee whiz! what next?" Bluff was muttering, as though things were happening so rapidly that almost any sort of surprise could be expected.

Frank pushed forward.

"Glad to see you here, but what's up, Gilbert?" he asked.

"Please speak in a whisper when you have to talk, Frank," replied the other.

"All right," said Frank, doing as he was told, "but please explain what it all means, for we've got a wounded man outside, who had his leg broken by a tree he was dropping, and we wish to bring him in here to make him easy."

"It'll all be over in a short time, I should think," continued Gilbert; "for he ought to be here any minute now."

"Who do you mean?" asked Bluff, like most boys caring naught for grammatical rules when far away from the school room.

"My uncle!" replied Gilbert.

"But why under the sun is Mr. Dennison coming down here to the cabin, and at midnight, too?" asked Jerry.

"That's just it," replied the visitor at the cabin. "I've known for some time that Uncle Aaron is a sleep-walker, you see."

Frank had already grasped the meaning of the situation, but Bluff was still groping in the dark. He proved this by asking:

"But what would your old uncle wander down here for in his sleep, Gilbert, when it must be all of half a mile anyway, and over a crooked trail?"

"I'll tell you what I think," replied the other, in a very low tone. "You see, he understands that I set great store on that gold cup I won, and which I brought up here with me when I came. He had it on his mind after I went away, being afraid some one would steal it."

"Oh! now I get what you mean," whispered Bluff. "In his sleep he took a notion to try to hide the thing where no one would find it. And since he used that cavity under the floor to keep his savings in long years ago, somehow he just wandered down here the one night we were all away, and put the cup there."

"Yes, and knew nothing about it when he came to search the cabin later on," explained Gilbert. "But keep still, everybody, for I really think I saw him coming out there in the open before the door. Please don't say a word, but just watch!"

CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

It was an exciting time when Gilbert and the four chums stood there as silent as ghosts, and waited for the arrival of the sleep-walker. Perhaps a dozen seconds had passed when there was a rustle and a sigh at the open door. Then a figure stalked in.

They could see that it was Aaron Dennison.

Mr. Dennison walked straight over to where that loose plank lay. He did not show the slightest sign of hesitancy, but stooping down placed some object on the floor, after which he began to raise the plank as though familiar with its working.

No wonder the boys stared, and Bluff chuckled softly, when they saw the object so carefully deposited on the floor by the man who walked in his sleep.

It was the golden cup, won in the amateur golf tournament by Gilbert Dennison!

They watched him lift the plank, and then

quickly place the cup in the hole underneath; after this he gently lowered the board, patted it affectionately, and arose to his feet as if to go.

Frank was more than satisfied. The mystery had been explained in a fashion that left not a shred of doubt behind.

At the same time Frank found himself wondering what Gilbert would do next. To convince Mr. Dennison that he himself was wholly to blame, it would seem to be the proper thing to awaken him before he quitted the cabin, and show him the cup nestling under the plank.

Frank dimly remembered reading that it was not a wise thing to arouse a sleep-walker suddenly; he understood that the sudden shock had a tendency to affect the brain. Apparently Gilbert did not know this, for he stepped forward and reaching out caught hold of the old man's arm, shaking it as he called:

"Wake up, Uncle Aaron, wake up!"

They saw the sleeper give a tremendous start. Then he stared first at Gilbert, and then around him as though dazed.

"It's I, Uncle, and you've been up to your old tricks again, walking in your sleep," the young fellow told him. "Yes, no wonder you look as if you could hardly believe your eyes; for you've wandered down to the old cabin on the Point.

And, Uncle, what do you think we saw you doing?"

As he said this Gilbert in turn suddenly stooped, and managing to get the loose plank up he pushed it aside. When he picked up the golden cup and held it before the eyes of the old gentleman, Bluff could hardly keep from bursting into laughter, the look of astonishment on Mr. Dennison's face was so ludicrous.

"Did I bring that cup here, and stow it away again in that hole, Gilbert?" he demanded.

"You certainly did, Uncle," he was told.

"Then it stands to reason that I must have been guilty on that other occasion, too, Nephew?" faltered the old hermit.

"Of course you were, Uncle. Don't you see, you worried over having the cup there on your hands; and in your sleep you must have dreamed about the old place here under the floor where you once used to hide things. And down you came all the way. It happened that the boys were all away on that night after the storm; isn't it so, fellows?"

"Yes," replied Frank, "Will here and I were caught up in the woods, and slept under a shelf of rock, while Bluff and Jerry stayed at the village, where they met the constable, Mr. Jeems. So the cabin was not occupied at all that night."

"And we knew somebody must have been in here," spoke up Will, "because the door wasn't closed as we left it, a chair had been pushed over, and some other things were disturbed. It was a great mystery to all of us, sir."

Mr. Dennison proved himself equal to the occasion. The look of consternation on his face had now given way to one of friendliness.

"Then I can plainly see how I have wronged these boys by accusing them of this mysterious taking of the golden cup," he said, frankly. "I trust all of you will forgive me, and that Gilbert will some time or other fetch you up to see me. I want particularly to become better acquainted with the one who is interested in wild animal photography."

Mr. Dennison whispered a few sentences to his nephew. Evidently he must have been telling Gilbert that he was at liberty to explain certain sad things connected with his past life, when the occasion arose, so that the boys would understand just why, for all his money, he lived in such a lonely place.

Then he said he must go, and asked Gilbert to accompany him.

"Be sure and bring that precious golden cup of yours," he told the other. "We'll have to find a safe place to keep it, if I'm going to have any

sound sleep after this. At my age I cannot afford to take chances of meeting with some accident when wandering around the woods at night-time. Good-bye, lads, and remember I shall hope to have you take supper with me some evening soon, when we can get better acquainted."

After Mr. Dennison and Gilbert had departed Frank thought again of the injured woodcutter, and, hastening out, they soon had him under the roof of the cabin.

In the morning it was decided that, as the weather seemed promising, two of them had better start for the village with the wounded man and Sandy. The boat was now in extra-good shape, and seemed hardly to leak a drop. Besides, the sooner Moogs was placed under the care of an experienced surgeon the better. Frank did not want to be responsible for the consequences any more than seemed absolutely necessary.

In time the injured woodcuter recovered from his severe wound; and the boys afterwards received a letter from Sandy, in which the boy tried hard to express the heavy obligations under which he and his "dad" felt themselves bound to the Outdoor Chums.

In the afternoon Gilbert came down to see them, and stayed over night.

As they sat around after supper and exchanged

confidences the boys learned of the tragedy that had taken place in the life of Aaron Dennison. It fully explained the mystery hovering over his enclosed estate.

He had had a single child, as the poor fragment of a baby shoe had informed Frank; but the little fellow had been taken away from them. The wife and mother had never been the same after that, though for years she continued to be the faithful partner of the man, as he fought his way up in the world.

In the end she entirely lost her reason, and Mr. Dennison, unwilling that the one he loved so fondly should be placed in even the best asylum, had conceived the idea of building this home far removed from civilization.

Here the poor lady lived attended by a trusty nurse day and night. There were bars across the windows of her sleeping chamber, because of late she had developed a mania for wanting to leap from a height and hence they had to take all precautions.

No doubt she imagined herself a prisoner, and seeing the boys below, she had waved her handkerchief to them, and also had made gestures with her hands as though invoking their aid.

Of course Frank assured Gilbert that when they came up to take supper with his uncle not

a word would be said on that painful subject. Even if they heard that pitiful wailing cry they would pretend that it was the screech of a strutting peacock, as once they had really believed.

After that the Outdoor Chums found each day bringing new pleasures. They went up to see Mr. Dennison, not only once but many times, for the old hermit soon found himself deeply interested in the boys. He asked a thousand questions concerning the things connected with their past, and seemed never to tire of listening while these little adventurous happenings were being narrated.

The glorious days slipped away and finally the day arrived when they must say good-bye to Cabin Point and all its happy associations.

Will had a large number of splendid pictures to carry back; and all the boys would often think of the happy times spent at the big lake.

Other events would undoubtedly cross their path, but in reviewing the strenuous past Frank and his Outdoor Chums would always remember with deepest interest the mystery of the golden cup, and how strangely it was solved while they were in camp at Cabin Point.

THE END

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